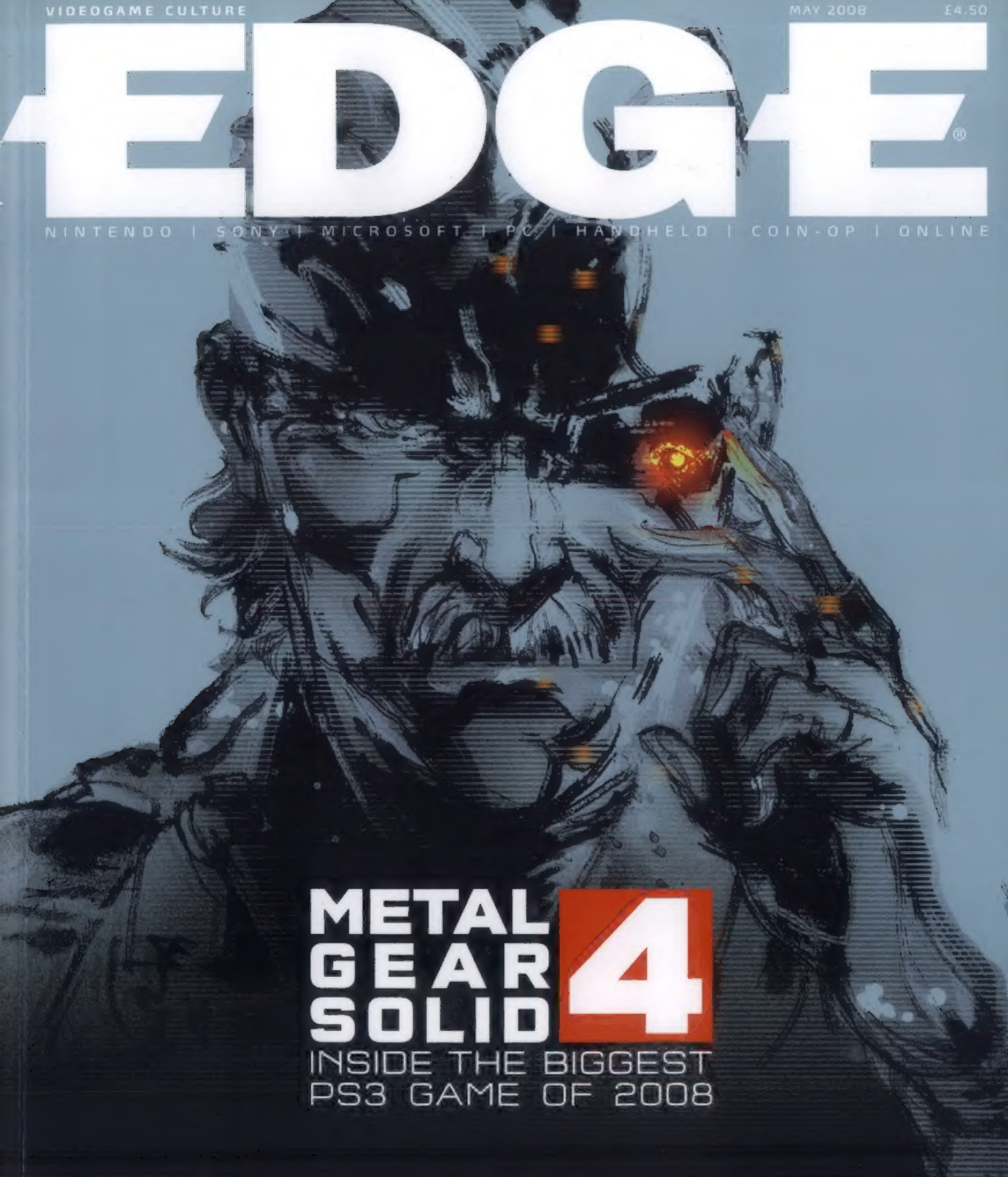


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METAL GEAR SOLID **4**

INSIDE THE BIGGEST
PS3 GAME OF 2008






When Sony Computer Entertainment execs began mapping out their vision for PlayStation 3 and started to consider the games at which the fattest bags of marketing cash would be thrown, it's unlikely that they envisioned one of the key entries being a vehicle for a middle-aged man with grey hair and a moustache who was prone to suffering the debilitating effects of stress when confronted with sticky situations. And yet here we are, in 2008, the year in which PS3 is gathering some real momentum, and in *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots* and its protagonist Solid Snake that is precisely the bent-out-of-shape leading man we're talking about.

Sony can be justly proud about what super-accessible, mainstream, lifestyle-oriented properties such as *SingStar* have given to the PlayStation brand as a whole, but it should also be given credit for continuing to support a creator such as Konami's Hideo Kojima, not only because there aren't enough like him working in games today. That the presentational format of the *MGS* series has often proved so divisive among gamers, and that he is aware of the criticisms that have been levelled at the non-interactive sections of *Metal Gear Solid's* past but is now going even further with them in this latest iteration, is proof enough that the man is, at least, true to his vision.

Vision alone obviously isn't enough. The structure underpinning it all is something we look at in more detail this issue, following an unorthodox trip to Konami's dazzling Nasu facility which was recently host to a playthrough of the entire *Guns Of The Patriots* experience. There are certainly elements of artistry here that will only enrapture those who've been keenly awaiting the next chapter in Solid Snake's evolution. But Kojima also expresses regrets about how closely the finished article matches his team's original imaginings, which ultimately means that, while many doors become closed, others become open. The report begins on page 62.

This month we also spent time in Vancouver in order to kick off *Region Specific*, a new, semi-regular section dedicated to pointing the spotlight at areas of burgeoning development talent (see page 101), and in Brighton to play *Buzz! The TV Quiz* (see page 56), a PS3 experience about as far removed from the darkly rendered action of Solid Snake's new adventure as could be imagined. From a grizzled action hero holding a gun in his mouth to a party game in which you can make a quiz about your goldfish: PS3 may not yet have delivered on some counts, but you can't argue that it's not welcoming of diversity. 



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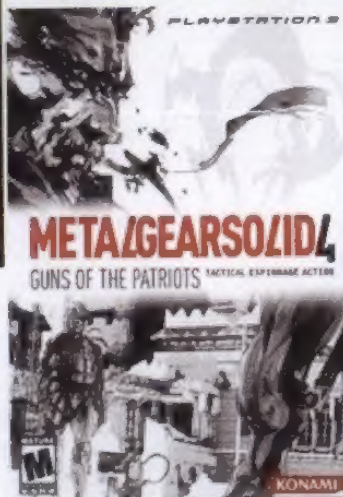
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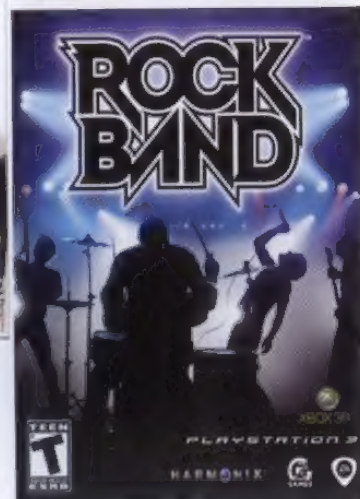
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 Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
 Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275
 Email: edge@futurenet.co.uk
 Edge website: www.next-gen.biz

PEOPLE ON EDGE

Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Alex Wilshire deputy editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Martin Davies writer
Richard Stanton writer
Christophe Kagotan Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor
Collin Campbell online editor (Next Generation)

CONTRIBUTORS

Steven Bailey, Stacy Black, Matthew Castle, N'Gai Croal, Christian Donnan, Phil Haycroft, Amy Hughes, Duncan Harris, Jon Jordan, Matthew Kumar, Gary Luckin, John McAllister, Sarah Moorhouse, Simon Parkin, Ben Richardson, Jim Rossignol, Rainy Smith, Terry Stokes, Rob Taylor, Mark Walkbank, Alvin Weetman

Ian Miller group art director
Robin Abbott creative director
Matthew Williams design director
Jim Douglas editorial director

ADVERTISING

Julian House advertising manager
Ryan Ferguson account director
Clara Dove UK sales director
 Advertising phone 01225 442244

MARKETING

Tom Acton marketing campaign manager
Matt Woods brand marketing director

CIRCULATION

Russell Hughes trade marketing manager
Duncan Shearer group circulation manager
Chris Sprattling circulation & trade marketing director

PRINT & PRODUCTION

Kirsty Bell senior production coordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Richard Mason head of production
Collin Poole Future Plus buyer

LICENSING

Tim Hudson head of international licensing

FEATURE PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY

James Blinn publishing director
Simon Wear chief operating officer
Robert Price chief executive

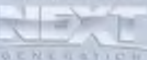
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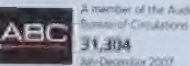
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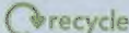
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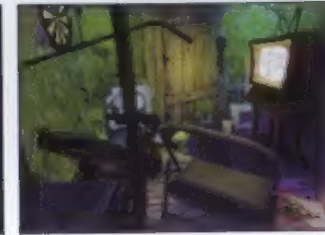
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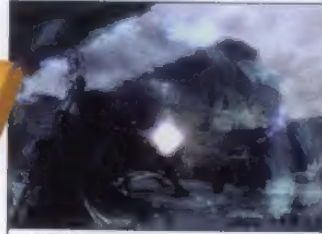
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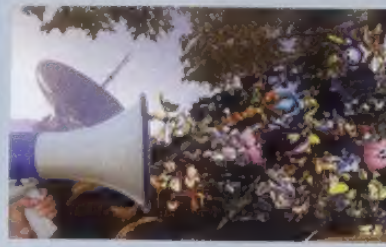


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START





COMMUNITY

Fan service

Forums, Flickr and Facebook – such lively communities are teaching devs that talking directly to the people who buy their games also helps sell them too

This isn't the first time in gaming history that developers have made the effort to talk with fans. They've hung out on message boards, scribbled into .plan files and responded personally to praise and criticism. There's been a fair number of frank post-mortems, insider glimpses and flame wars – all delivered straight to fans. What separates the efforts of companies like Bizarre Creations, Bungie or Lionhead from past fan encounters is scale and organisation. Suddenly, community management is about more than locking the occasional thread on a forum. It's a carefully orchestrated strategy that spans multiple sites outside of your company's own domain, corralling the most headlined socially focused websites – YouTube, Flickr and Facebook – as part of an industrial application of fanboy fervour.

If, before, developers drew back the curtain only out of personal empathy with their fans' interests, or, dare we suggest, occasional narcissism, then now the reasons for doing so are

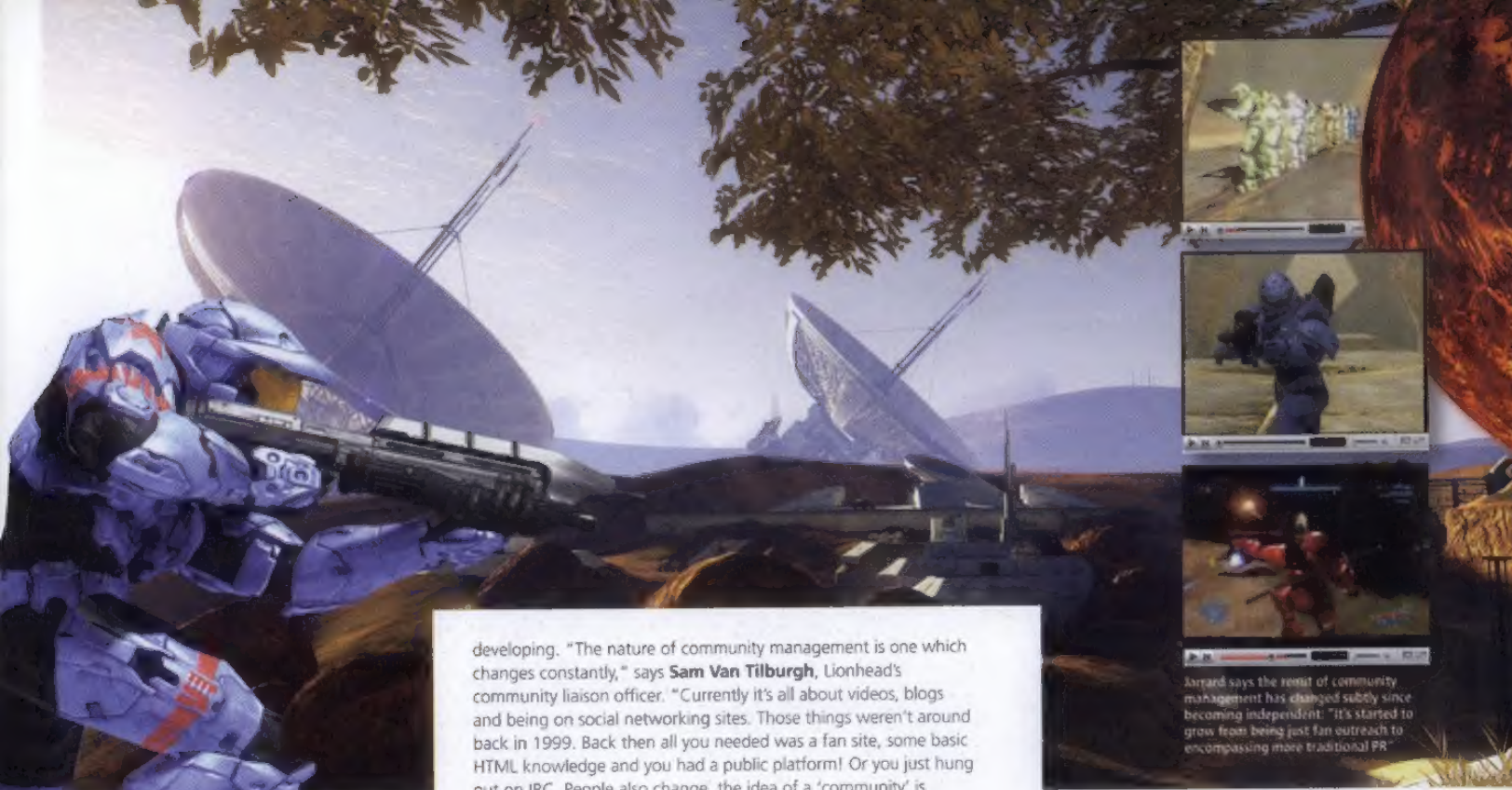
far more controlled, far more defined by marketing practice. Perhaps it's not surprising that many of the companies with the most comprehensive community services are, or have been, affiliates of Microsoft Game Studios – the emphasis on Live has left them better aware of the challenges involved, and, with Bungie as an example, the potential power that can be unlocked.

In fact, those that have left Microsoft's fold have more reason to be concerned about community than most, particularly if they don't have ownership of the IP they labour to create. "The thinking was that it would span games and publishers," says Bizarre Creations' **Ben Ward** of the three-year community building programme. "At the time we were working on *PGR3*. When it was released [we were afraid that] it would just become Microsoft's community and then, when we worked on the next game, we wouldn't be able to haul those people over to it and be able to keep them interested in Bizarre. That's difficult when you're independent."

Even a company as well-known as Bungie faces the same problem following its split with Microsoft and the *Halo* series, as community lead **Brian Jarrard** explains: "Not everyone that buys *Halo* knows what Bungie is. We want to convert *Halo* fans into Bungie fans and so we'll take them with us when we do the next game."

It's what we hear from many of the developers we speak to – they want to become brands themselves, superseding individual titles, franchises, platforms and publishers. Creating and maintaining a community is one way of achieving this; building a rapport with fans to prove that, in the words of Jarrard, they're not just faceless people in cubicles cranking out a product to make money.

Obviously, creating and nurturing a loyal following has been a commercial strategy since wares were first hawked – but it's the means of achieving it, and the extent of what is possible, that has now shifted in the wake of the way the web is



developing. "The nature of community management is one which changes constantly," says **Sam Van Tilburgh**, Lionhead's community liaison officer. "Currently it's all about videos, blogs and being on social networking sites. Those things weren't around back in 1999. Back then all you needed was a fan site, some basic HTML knowledge and you had a public platform! Or you just hung out on IRC. People also change, the idea of a 'community' is discourse-based, and one with a human voice based on human values means the community role has also got to change with time and people."

The ideas that Van Tilburgh discusses find an early expression in the Cluetrain Manifesto – a document written in 1999 that sets out how businesses need to rethink their practices in the age of the internet. It describes markets as conversations, places emphasis on the need to create a human voice for a company and points to hyperlinking as a useful subversion of more formal, hierarchical means of communication such as through the media. Its thrust is summarised by Van Tilburgh: "Corporations work best when the people on the inside have the fullest contact possible with the people on the outside."

In an internet landscape pocked with blogs and criss-crossed by RSS feeds, word of mouth has once again become one of the most powerful means of marketing yourself. And, in shaping how people talk about you, developers have learnt to harness the full range of existing web tools and social networking sites.

"We've started rolling out satellite services," explains Ward. "Things like our YouTube account on which we're putting our trailers. We've got a Flickr account for screenshots and photos, we've started a Facebook group which ties it together. These aren't things that you can't get on our website, but it takes the content to the community

Jarrard says the remit of community management has changed subtly since becoming independent: "It's started to grow from being just fan outreach to encompassing more traditional PR"

rather than the community to the content. We don't want to say that in order to see the latest PGR4 trailer you have to go to Bizarrecrations.com. We want to say that if you're browsing YouTube for racing games you might see it."

Looking toward these external sites isn't just a matter of the developers extending their own influence, however. It's also a means of empowering the community to grow and manage itself without the constant attention of developers.

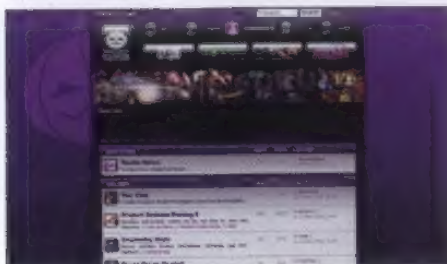
"The community is so large now that we can't single-handedly do everything any more, and I don't think we should," says Jarrard. "There are plenty of people out there that are talented and excited enough to do fan videos, tutorials. So how do we give these people more tools and help them? If we amplify what they do and expose and share their creations with the broader community it will feed itself."

It is also a reality of the internet that communities continually fragment and reconfigure themselves, making them impossible to manage from any central hub. Jarrard cites the 'AOL effect' as a motivation for the dispersal of hardcore gamers to the fringes – a term coined in the earlier days of the internet when a spike in popularity would bring hoards of web-naïve people to a site, dragging the signal-to-noise ratio down.

"When *Halo 2* was released the floodgates opened and we had a million new people on our website," says Jarrard. "Trying to juggle that was a challenge for us. Just practically speaking, the forums became inundated – people who had a voice and be a regular person would get flooded [by the sheer number of posts]. We found that a lot of our old core, original fans really didn't take well to the influx – in fact it turned them off and

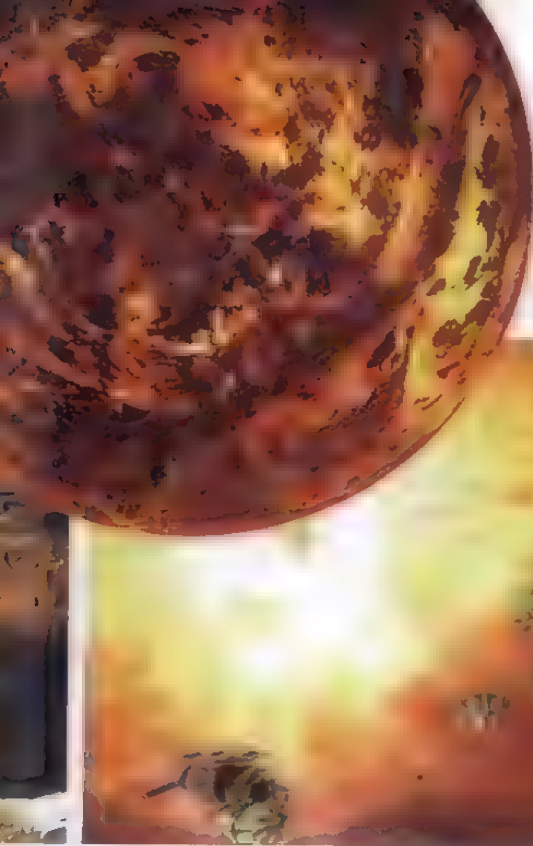


Bungie recognises that the masses are as important a part of its community strategy as the hardcore – necessitating a change in the way it views the function of its website and satellite fansites

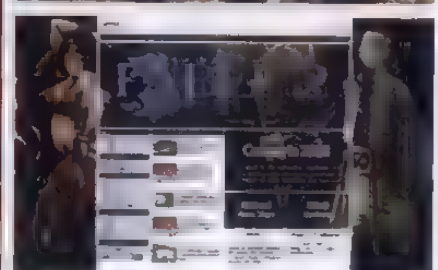


Project Gotham developer Bizarre Creations considers its community as a means of establishing a voice for itself and to be a good way to get a message out – illustrated by publishing its recent open letter to Gordon Brown, on the subject of tax credits, via its website





Blair Fraser says that Ironclad's fans were essential to the development and promotion of its space strategy game *Sins of a Solar Empire* (left). "They form the backbone of a grassroots marketing effort which is critical to smaller companies like us"



we saw some of them migrate to external fan sites. We recognised that Bungie.net had to be a broad entry point to *Halo*.

Branding and marketing aren't the only reasons that community building is commercially useful, as Ward explains. "We get a lot of design-based feedback from the forums. It's not our only place to get it - we have usability labs - but it's a good place for immediate feedback. You've got to take it all with a pinch of salt because you're talking to the most hardcore of the hardcore that are probably only on there to heavily complain about or praise something. The middle ground won't be there."

"Because we're open, when a comment doesn't get acted on, people take it personally. We have to come up with the essence of what people are asking for"

Nonetheless, smaller companies, such as Ironclad, have found that their community has served not only as an essential part of their product development but also as a support network.

"The feedback, positive and negative, is too great to ignore," says Ironclad director **Blair Fraser**. "One really important thing I discovered about having an educated fan community after release is that they are very good at answering questions and solving problems. As unit they operate 24/7 from around the globe. With all the new people coming in it would be impossible for us to handle the load all by ourselves."

But such close ties create challenges - despite the fact that much of its internal research was

driven by the community, Bungie has found that the promise of two-way communication is a difficult contract to fulfil.

"It kind of gives a sense of entitlement to our fans that what they say we're going to react to," says Jarrard. "Because we're open, when a comment doesn't get acted on, people take it personally. We always tread lightly on that ground. We have to come up with the essence of what people are asking for and work out how to fix it."

There have been other problems too - such as when the developer's commitment to its community comes into conflict with publishers or traditional media.

"We're not trying to sling mud around," says Jarrard. "But occasionally we might need to set the record straight on something that couldn't be accomplished through a publisher." Jarrard points to the backlash over the pricing of the Heroic Map Pack

on Live, which Bungie was quick to state was out of its hands. "It's an opportunity to distance ourselves from something that maybe would reflect poorly on the developer and their community."

Similarly, interacting directly with the consumer circumvents the sometimes distortive lens of the media, meaning that developers have greater control over how their games are presented, unswayed by third-party opinion.

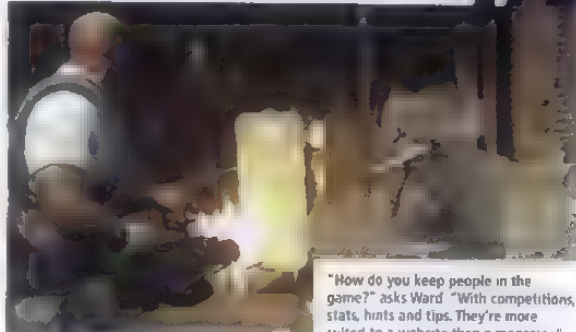
"We always try to be slightly ahead of the more formalised press activities," says Jarrard. "If you think about the perspective of the Microsoft PR team, they have the decision to give the first look to reveal on IGN or somewhere else, and I have to walk a fine line between that and the fact that we

would like as much exclusive content on our website as possible. On the new map pack, Microsoft put out the press release this morning and we put up an interview with our team and the same screenshots sent out to the media just prior to the press release."

While the tools at the disposal of developers allow them to circumvent the media, define themselves on their own terms, react to and nurture a continuing interest in their games, the underlying motivation that drives the communities remains the same: people who share a passion.

"It's just like talking to them everyday," says Fraser. "The regulars are like family - which is really important over the course of a long development process. I hope a lot of them stick around to help us with our next project."

As academicised as the process has become, as geared toward marketing and corporate strategy as the underlying goals may be, it's personal connections that bring a sense of belonging - and that's community in its truest sense.



"How do you keep people in the game?" asks Ward. "With competitions, stats, hints and tips. They're more suited to a website than a magazine."



A Haze of glory

As Free Radical and Ubisoft gear up for the release of *Haze*, we discover the vagaries of life at the sharp end

Haze seems like it's been a long time coming, after a series of short delays, but it will finally see release in May. At a recent Ubisoft event we played a near-complete build (see p 36) and spoke to the project's creative director **Derek Littlewood**, about the practical side of finishing and launching a high-profile title

What have the delays let you do with *Haze*?

The thing about the delay is it's given us the opportunity to deliver the game we wanted to. People have asked what new stuff we've added because of it, but we haven't added much of that at all. It's just allowed us to properly refine the large feature-set we already had, and polish the hell out of it. In that time the game that *Haze* is hasn't changed, we've just been able to deliver it to the standard we wanted to originally

"Haze is not trying to say, 'This is how things are,' it's trying to create a point of view that isn't as simple as going 'PMCs are bad or good'" – Derek Littlewood

Does it bother you that you've had to show quite a bit of the game to create a buzz?

From an idealistic perspective it does bother me because, as a gamer, I like that experience of going into a game knowing nothing about it. In a way, I really don't envy you having to play previews of games – with *Super Mario Galaxy* I avoided all of the previews and PR for it, so that when I put that disc in my Wii it was an unknown experience. And with your own game that's obviously the experience you're looking to provide for people, (you're) assuming they'll go in fresh

But at the same time, when we first started showing the game it was just the Mantel troopers, and that part of the game is deliberately trying to be 'Here's your generic military soldier dosed up on this drug that gives him all these amazing powered-up abilities, look how cool it is.' So, not surprisingly, people took away the message that it was some kind of generic shooter. And it was only when we spoke about the rebels that people saw what we were doing with the game and got interested. It's that difficult battle you have in any commercial creative industry where you have to balance the necessity of getting people interested



in the first place against giving them a great experience. So idealistically it does bother me, but we absolutely have to be realistic about it – you always hope someone will come to your game without preconceptions

In recent times, it's become almost fashionable for games to claim they have a 'perspective' on the military or on war. What do you think of the likes of *COD4* and *Army Of Two*?

Army Of Two certainly isn't the first one, there have been a number of games come along saying 'We've got something to say about modern-day political situations and the ethics of PMCs'. There's some very well-observed moments in *COD4* – I think that's what separates certain games from the rest, because a great story is about showing, not telling. The games that sit there and just come out with one-liners about 'the situation' – that's not communicating a message, that's just saying to someone 'I think this'. *COD4* very much communicates through subtleties of the narrative and things you experience while playing it. That's what we've tried with *Haze* – it's not trying to be aggressively one point of view, saying 'This is how things are', it's trying to create a point of view that isn't as simple as going 'PMCs are bad or good'

Do you think it will resonate beyond the surface level with the wider gaming public?

Yes – because – and I've said this lots of times before but it never seems to get through – gamers aren't stupid. Why is it that the level of narrative that can be presented in cinema has to be dumbed down that bit further for a gamer? I don't understand that. I think it's just perceptions of the market, and I hope that's something that continues to change

How have the delays and the last year or so of development been for the *Haze* team?

In 2007, the first day we got back to work, it was [claps hands]: "We're going to finish *Haze*" And



This is a rebel vehicle, so it's a scratchy converted junker with painted logos. The Mantel vehicles are deeply and gloriously black, with immaculate branding and in-built weapon systems



Ubisoft exec orders Clancy brand purchase

Last month Ubisoft announced that it had purchased the perpetual right to use the Tom Clancy name for videogames and related products for the princely sum of 60 million euros. That may seem like an obscene figure, but it's apparently a bargain, with Ubisoft predicting that the company will save five million euros in royalty payments every year. In fact this predicted saving is rather modest, as it excludes earnings from ancillary products such as game-related books, films and merchandise, which are also covered by the deal



the team all worked long hours and when we realised we'd get extra time on the one hand we were thinking it was great news because it would let us add that five or ten per cent to make things just that bit better. But at the same time you realise I've barely seen my friends and family this year. It's such a good thing that Free Radical pay overtime and I was so amazed when they said that because it's not cheap. [Free Radical is still one of only a handful of developers that pays its employees overtime.]

How big a difference does overtime make to a development team?

Well, it's like Steve Ellis, our company director, said when we announced it: the industry has to be trying to do something about this. This is not an acceptable way to continue. There are a lot of enormously talented people who are just going through this, being burnt out and moving on. If you want to preserve your talent and have people who can move up through the ranks to be project leads and producers, you can't just constantly burn them out. And if they do have to work hard, then make sure they're rewarded. It's a really good thing.



You'll notice when playing as and fighting the Mantel troopers that the fallen are always quickly replaced. No room for individuals in this man's army

Independent minds

A team of only two people, Metanet has seen both sides of the developer/publisher fence – and is still fiercely independent

SOUND

"We, in many ways, represent a white knight."

EAs John Ricchiello paints an arresting picture: he's the guy in shining armour, and Take-Two's the helpless damsel

"The strong moral core opposed to violence, and the vivid imagery with which Shigematsu brought home this lesson, convinced me that I should sell out immediately. No, seriously, I wouldn't have translated a bunch of blood-and-guts slice 'em ups, but it certainly didn't hurt that they were willing to pay well for these fundamentally wholesome didactic pieces."

Lost Odyssey translator Jay Rubin is a Harvard professor of Japanese humanities not averse to a little lure

"We have this huge digital generational divide at the moment where children are enjoying benefits and opportunities both online and in videogames but parents are really genuinely confused in terms of what videogames are and how their kids are playing them, what the content really means and what should they be allowing their kids to play."

Dr Tanya Byron's review of the effects of videogames and internet use on children concludes that more people should be reading Edge

"PCs are fantastic gaming platforms, in spite of Intel and Microsoft. And they should absolutely be pinioned for the stupid stuff they've done to make the PC not as good a platform as it would be without their help screwing it up."

Alex St John, original architect of DirectX tells his former employer how it is

"We give a donation for every game we sell to Warchild, and the charity trade magazine published a negative piece, that this charity was making money out of the horrible videogame industry that goes around shooting people – we're a football management game."

Sports Interactive's studio head Miles Jacobson calls for a dismemberment between sports and videogames

Originally begun as a release from a computing course at the University of Toronto, Metanet Software, the operating name of Raigan Burns and Mare Sheppard (pictured right), developed the 2005 Independent Games Festival Audience Choice Award winner *N+*, and has since worked as publisher of *N+* on Xbox Live Arcade and as licensors of *N+* for Nintendo DS and Sony PSP (where it is to be published by Atari.) We talked to Sheppard and Burns to gain their unique insight on working with Microsoft, the struggle of maintaining their artistic vision, and what it means to be indie

How did *N+* go from a freeware Flash game to Xbox Live Arcade and the handhelds?

Raigan Burns: It was originally made for a Flash games contest in which it didn't even make it into

"Currently it's not working – it's not the game we wanted to make. Atari want to expand the audience, but there are a lot of changes we haven't been so happy with"

the finals. That was kind of demoralising, so we just put it on the internet

Mare Sheppard: After we won the IGF Award, Microsoft got in touch, and eventually Atari got interested. That's how that whole... thing started

Aren't you happy about the handheld version?

MS: Currently it's not working – it's not the game we wanted to make. In part it's understandable. Atari want to expand the audience, but there are a lot of changes we haven't been so happy with



What happened?

MS: We're licensors instead of publisher. Being publisher on XBLA allowed us to direct the project, as we had final say and were doling out the cash

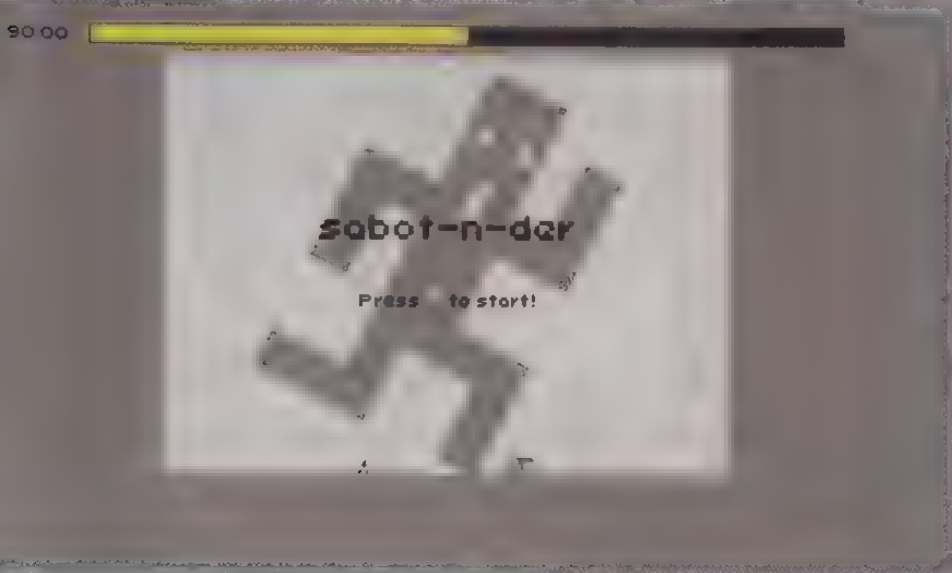
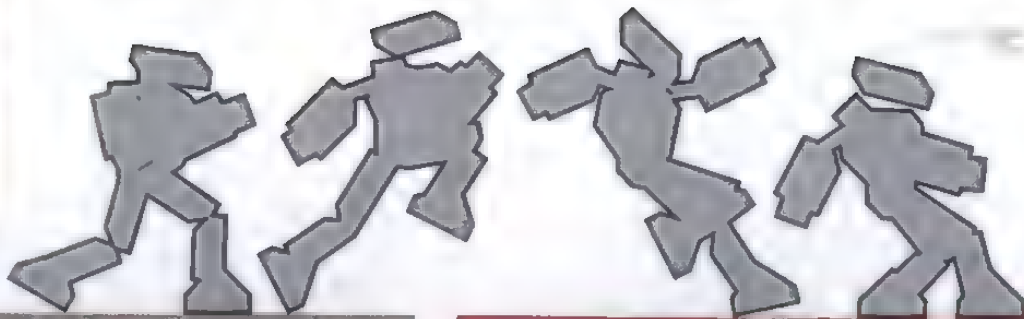
RB: The developer is local, so we thought it was the perfect set-up – we could see them weekly. But we'd have two-hour meetings with a list of fixes where they'd say 'yes', write it down, and never change it

MS: The one thing the handhelds are going to do very well is content sharing, though



Although the pair had problems with the Microsoft certification team, Sheppard noted that, to their credit, they had to play through every level every time the game was submitted for testing: "They had to play over 500 levels several times a week. It must have been hell!"

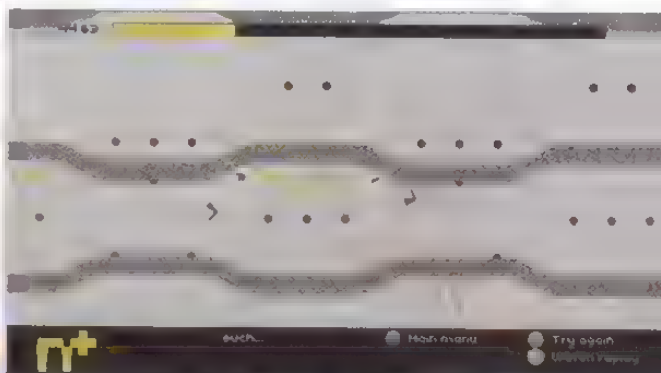
Burns also felt certification was easier than others imply: "It was fine until we failed. The real problem is that you get two chances, and each time you fail after that costs \$10,000"



Robotology

Metanet isn't stopping at N

Although work as publisher and licensor of *N+* became a full-time job for Metanet, they're still hard at work on *Robotology*, their thematic sequel to the original *N*. "It's going to be another 2D platformer like *N*, but the main character has a grappling hook," Sheppard explains. Burns continues: "Physical interaction with enemies is going to be a major part of it, and the movement is going to be very smooth – you'll run up a giant robot's leg, grab it with the grappling hook and then flip off to trip it up. We're hoping physical comedy is going to make a big comeback."



Why did you have to remove content sharing from the Xbox Live Arcade release? *Halo 3* has it, after all.

RB: With *Halo 3* they're hosting the content themselves. You can rent a server from Microsoft for more than the whole budget of *N+*, and they will be completely happy. Our system hinged on using the leaderboards, and Microsoft will not allow any questionable content on there. They can't police it.

How strict is Microsoft about this 'questionable content'?

RB: Before we could begin certification we had to fix a bug. "level names should not be horribly offensive in their manner". The level was called 'pee-pee soaked heck-hole!' But really, when it comes to Microsoft's argument against the level editor, "What if you make a penis shaped level?" In *Halo* people are running around with giant guns, teabagging each other – where's the line?

Do you have more respect for publishers now you know first-hand what they have to deal with?

RB: Sure, there's a lot of work to do, and you should get something for doing it, but you shouldn't get to own someone else's idea or take the lion's share of the royalties. That's just a scam. The one thing they do well is marketing, but it's not right that a successful strategy is to spend more money on marketing than on development. It's an arms race that you have to participate in but



When asked to describe other things the team managed to slip past Microsoft's eagle-eyed testers, Burns confesses: "One thing that did get through was the cactuar shaped level. We were really worried about that one and we're still kind of waiting for a letter..."

it's so negative. It atrophies the game development part and makes it subservient to the business. It's dangerous that the business of games could be the business of anything.

What does it mean to be indie now?

RB: It's pretty nebulous. I've been toying with the idea of 'alternative games'. We need another description. Indie is useless – it just means you're independently owned. I mean, id and Valve are independently owned, but they're still operating in the mainstream.

I think it should be based on some sort of mathematical formula, where you take the number of people at a company and divide it by the number of people who don't do any development. But under that metric, Introversion is screwed. They're the Sex Pistols of gaming? They're the Sex Pistols if there was one Johnny Rotten with four Malcolm McLarens. Even if the most important thing about making games is marketing, without Chris Delay they'd be screwed. However, without them, he'd still be making great games.



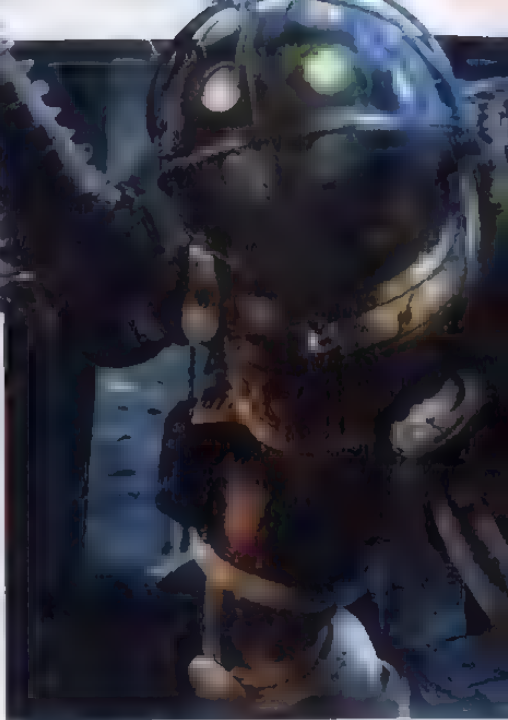
INTERVIEW

Rhapsody in Rapture

The man behind BioShock explains the influence of Bertolt Brecht and Irish brogue



Levine is certainly mighty chuffed by the deluge of audio gongs *BioShock* has scooped: "We were able to bring back Eric Brosius who worked at Looking Glass, and Kemal Amarasingham too – and they really knocked it out of the park"



Ken Levine's speech about the construction of narrative in *BioShock* was one of the most popular talks at GDC – the success of that game has left the industry preoccupied with the manner in which games integrate plot with play. We met him after the talk to mull over Rapture's setting, sound and story.

***BioShock's* 1930s macabre style hit an aesthetic trend that coincided with a resurgence in the burlesque. Was that something you saw coming?**

Do I look like a trend setter to you? I had no fucking idea – that's news to me. I'm up in my room playing *World Of Warcraft* – was always very excited by German expressionism of the '20s and '30s – Brecht and all that sort of stuff. My parents loved Broadway and show music so I grew up listening to that period of music.

I can't hear *Rhapsody in Blue* without thinking of New York in the '30s. So it didn't come about through a trend thing – it came about from things I had experienced and encountered myself, like the [Nobel]ist and philosopher Ayn Rand had an effect on me at another point. They were all just things swimming round my head. There was no master plan to replicate on any market. When we were about to ship [Christopher Hartmann] the guy who runs the business side of 2K said that the music had become popular again, and I was like "Oh really?" I think we won an audio design thing last night – we may have won for the licensed music.

too – I'm not sure if we did. That would make me happy because I didn't think it was in my skill set.

There was a lot of talk about narrative at this year's GDC – the industry seemed galvanised, or perhaps panicked, by games like *Portal* and *BioShock*. What lessons are people learning?

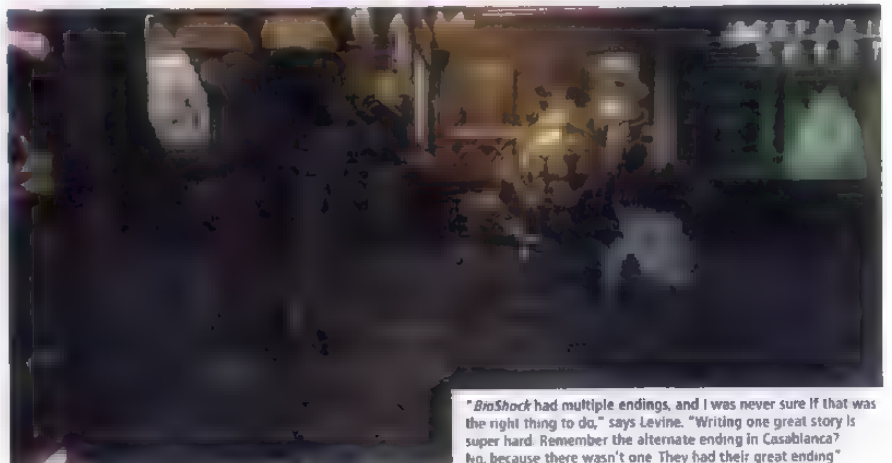
[At the GDC lecture, a talk about pull versus push in the narrative space in *BioShock*, we're not pushing the story at people, we just say "Here it is pull in what you like, as much as possible." And with the audio logs and the posters around the world and listening to the public service announcements and just what you'd happen to see looking down a corridor – there were all these little moments described in the mise en scene – the voice of that is that the player is participatory in that narrative. If you allow somebody to come in and let them draw their own rate or opt out altogether – it's like if you see a small dog, if I go to grab the dog, it freaks out, but if you just sit back and hold up a bone then maybe it will come



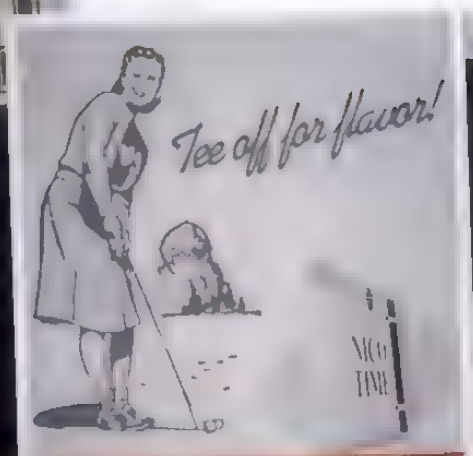
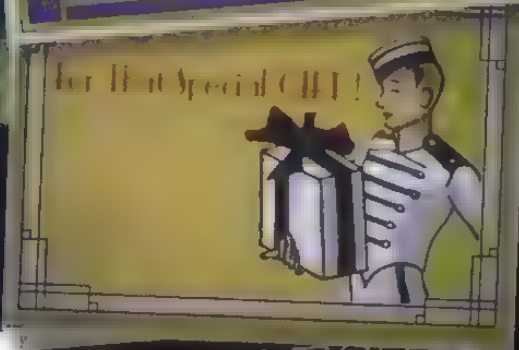
WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

If William Burroughs had got obsessed with Japanese arcade beat 'em ups and decided to ditch writing heroin-induced hallucinatory literature for a career in heroin-induced hallucinatory animation, then he might just have created something as brilliant as one of Paul Robertson's films. From this blog, which is shared by a number of his talented pixel artist chums, you can download and view Robertson's works, including his latest, *Kings of Power 4 Billion %*. It's a gruesomely cute pixelated anime romp of apocalyptic proportions, dealing with the weighty subjects of war and religion – well, possibly. At any rate, it features a woman, riding on the back of a giant pig, in bloody combat with the Buddha. We wouldn't like to say what it means, but one thing is certain: it looks like the best videogame you will never play.

Site: The Mecha Fetus Visual Blog
URL: <http://visublog.mechafetus.com/>



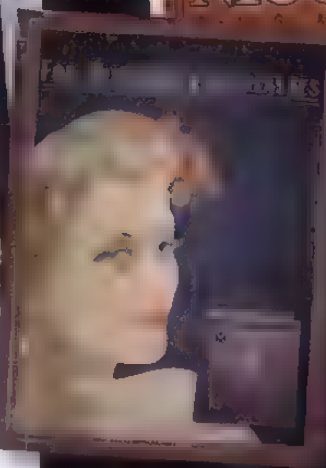
"*BioShock* had multiple endings, and I was never sure if that was the right thing to do," says Levine. "Writing one great story is super hard. Remember the alternate ending in *Casablanca*? No, because there wasn't one. They had their great ending."



in because it doesn't feel threatened, it feels like it's up to them. You need to empower the player not just in gameplay but in narrative. I think that's why people engaged with our story so much – they didn't feel it was forced upon them.

How do you gauge what players know about your story at any one point? Is focus-testing really useful for something so subjective?

We didn't get a lot of data regarding the story. We first tested the game with a different actor playing Atlas – I'd written it for Morgan Freeman, and I learnt the lesson that if you don't get Morgan Freeman but you've written for Morgan Freeman, you're in big fucking trouble. I wanted a character you would automatically trust for Atlas – the honey tones of Morgan Freeman, the Driving Miss Daisy feel, plays into the darker corners of people's views on race. There's a period of film where you have and it's an unpleasant term – the 'Magical Negro', which is the helpful black guy who's only there to help the white characters. And I wanted to play on



"One of my favorite parts of the project was choosing the licensed music," says Levine. "I knew a bunch of it already – I knew Bobby Darin and Billy Holiday, but I called my dad, who was a young man during that period. It put me back in touch with my dad a little bit, so it was nice."

"You need to empower the player not just in gameplay but in narrative. I think that's why people engaged with our story so much – they didn't feel it was forced upon them"

that and then, when the twist in the game happened, go completely against that notion. This guy was playing on your own sort of weaknesses and feelings about race. The actor had couldn't get that across. What people heard was a southern [US] accent, and there was an inherent distrust in him. They thought he sounded sinister and shifty.

These issues of region and race are really complex, and I'm not trying to draw any conclusions. It's just the feedback we got: people hated it. People didn't trust him, and if you have an Atlas that you hate and distrust, then you've got problems when the reveal happens. So I fired him

and rewrote. I went for this over-the-top Irish, almost leprechaun kind of thing. He was a little folksy and colourful. And then Joe McDonagh (senior designer on *BioShock*) a guy I trust a lot said: "That sounds

nothing like an Irishman. That's awful!" We got some feedback from the UK office and they were also unhappy with the voice, and I was like "Oh God, am I going to have to do this all again?" So said: "Let's just do a focus test in the UK" and the feedback we got was that people trusted him. The guy was Irish, he was just from a different part of Ireland, it's tough with focus testers – nobody's going to tell you what to do. They tell you what they don't like, and that's useful, sometimes, but it's almost impossible to get what they want from that. If 98 per cent of the people say they hate it, you're probably in trouble.





James Baker (pictured with his hardware collection, left) has a good reason to be so committed to games: he's president of WDDG (www.wddg.com), a New York-based outfit that specialises in interactive promotional content for clients such as Wrigley, for which it overhauled Candystand.com in 2006, transforming it into one of the most popular casual gaming sites on the internet. Under the Inferno label, Baker's team also self-funded and developed the GBA game *Wade Hixton's Counterpunch*.

The \$15,000 NES cart

How far would you go in order to secure one of the rarest pieces of gaming merchandise in existence? And what would you do with it?

There is amassing a few shelves' worth of tatty Dreamcast and Neo-Geo Pocket games and calling yourself a serious collector, and there is handing over the price of a small car for a single cartridge. James Baker falls into the latter camp, having recently spent \$15,000 securing one of the 26 gold-coloured NES carts originally manufactured for the Nintendo World Championships in 1990. We caught up with him to find out what it's like to be part of an elite club

So, why would you pay \$15,000 for a videogame?

Well, I don't really look at it as purely a videogame, it's more like the Honus Wagner of videogame collecting – or like Action Comics number one. There are 50-60 Honus Wagner cards out there and only 12 accounted NWC gold carts accounted for, so comparatively it's pretty cheap! But, yeah, it's pretty crazy that I spent that much on a videogame, regardless of rarity

"The are only 12 gold carts accounted for, so comparatively it's pretty cheap! But, yeah, it's pretty crazy that I spent that much on a videogame, regardless of rarity"

Will you actually play the cart?

Well, when I first got it we fired it up at the office and played it for a while – and I didn't even need to blow on the end of it to get it to work. But I have a friend who's an architect and eventually we're going to collaborate on building a really cool installation to put it into

How does the NWC cart compare to other rarities in your possession?

It's clearly the showpiece of the collection. I have some favourites, like the Nintendo 64DD, which is probably going to remain my favourite item. I also have a NES Deluxe Edition that predates when Nintendo decided to split the bundles. I also have a mint *Atari Pong* system, complete with the batteries included and somehow they haven't corroded yet. But in terms of price and rarity, this is by far the key piece

How long have you been looking for it?

I've been looking for a few years, but I wasn't serious about getting it until recently. I've avoided collecting carts for a while – I always looked at them as a slippery slope, since there are just so many collectible carts out there to get. When I



started, I concentrated on systems – I'm up to 130 now. But I think that this game really validates the collection as one of the best out there

What have your friends' reactions been like?

The guys at the office were for it. I don't think I'm going to be bragging to any of my non-videogame geek friends that I have it, though. Like I said, when it came in we played it immediately. The ones that aren't into games, well, either I don't tell them or when I tell them they think I'm nuts. But I don't blame them

How much have you spent on collecting?

On collecting in general? I don't even want to hazard a guess. I was a relatively hardcore Star Wars collector for years, and I collected comics well into college. But when I started collecting games about five years ago I was astounded at how cheap they all were. It all started when I found a mint Famicom on eBay for \$10. I always wanted a Famicom and a Super Famicom when I was growing up and seeing them in game magazines, so when I was able to find these mint, boxed classics my OCD kicked in and I went nuts. But the total cost of shipping and handling on my collection probably cost me more than the systems themselves. The most I would pay for something? Well, I think I'm tapped out for a while

What's next on your list?

There are a few things I'm still hunting for, like a reasonably priced Adventure Vision and an Interton VC4000. But I'd really like to track down a set of original Nintendo Hanafuda cards.

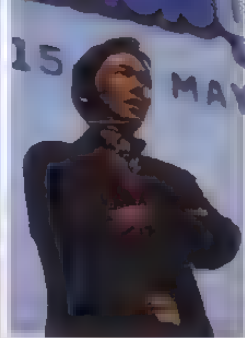


REIN ON BUNGIE'S PARADE

When we spoke to Epic's Mark Rein a few months ago, he was thrilled about the complete freedom users have to bring custom content to the PS3 version of *Unreal Tournament 3*. He was less enthused by the fact that so many user-generated maps simply recreate content from other games. We imagine his dismay increased upon seeing that the Master Chief has now arrived on PS3 in the form of a *UT3* custom avatar. His chagrin may be less than Bungie's, however: everybody's favourite Spartan may just look a little bit better in this form than he does in *Halo 3*.



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Last year's press panel (far left) was all doom and gloom, predicting the death of print media (Hello there!) Much more cheerful was Hilmar Petursson of CCP (below), who talked about keeping *Eve Online's* Machiavellian players happy



The Norse whisperers

The Nordic Game Conference is five years old in May, and once again looks to promote local talent globally

After taking more than 40 developers to this year's GDC, the Nordic Game organisation is returning to the homelies crines of Malmö, Sweden, for its annual conference on May 14-15. It's the fifth anniversary of the event that aims to showcase the Nordic region's role as a global innovator, and over that time it has grown into one of the largest of its kind with hundreds of industry attendees.

Its programme is aimed at working professionals and covers key areas in the present and future of development and o visual arts, game design, programming and business-production management. As well as this, the conference keynotes usually manage to cause their fair share of controversy. Topping last year's will be a

challenge, not least for the delightful as des NanaOn'Sha's **Matsuya Matsuura** (the creator of Parappa Rapping) Sony's knuckles because the PlayStation 3 was 'too big for the Japanese' was a particular highlight. To be fair, he did add that "with Xbox, the problem is not the size of the hardware but of the AC adapter."

Trying to live up to such diminutive wisdom will be Jonathan Smith from *Traveler's Tales*, giving an insight into the work behind the Lego series called *Putting the Pieces in Play*. Zoë Mode's Ste Curran will talk about videogame narrative in *Stories About Stories*, and a Northern Lights roundtable discussion about the region's unique qualities will be chaired by journalist John McKinley. It's notable that none of the keynotes feature Nordic speakers,

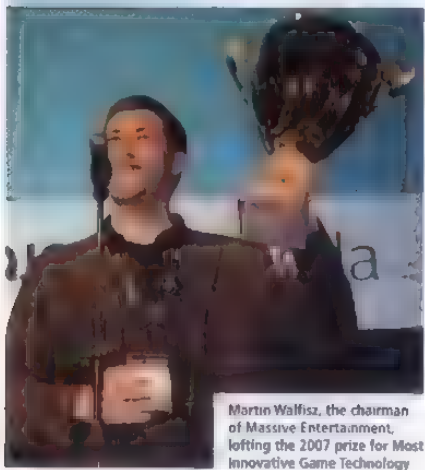
and only the roundtable has any obvious local relevance, which, given the conference's stated aims, seems a little unusual. At least the fourth lot should take minds off that: Harmonix's Rob Kay and Ryan Lesser presenting

the keynote *We ROCK You*. Harmonix being Harmonix, they'll also be turning up "with special guests" so expect a little noise.

As well as all the headliners, the conference's Career Expo (which is only on May 15) offers free admission and is a comprehensive recruitment and education fair for the Nordic games industry – but also has a very particular addition to the usual. It now includes speed dating sessions. Dare we suggest you boot early to avoid disappointment? Looking aside, the careers provision is of enormous value to those looking to work in the Nordic region, and accompanied by the likes of the Developer Spotlight events (which showcase specialists going about their work, a most make attendance mandatory).

The complete program was announced on April 7, and registration is now open online (www.nordicgame.com)

The Career Expo offers free admission and is a comprehensive recruitment and education fair about the Nordic games industry – and also includes speed dating



Martin Wallisz, the chairman of Massive Entertainment, lofting the 2007 prize for Most Innovative Game Technology



Now is the moment to point out that conference fees include meals – which, we're assured, usually consist of more than coffee and a doughnut

Continue

It's getting better, a little better all the time

There's just something in that plastic, isn't there?

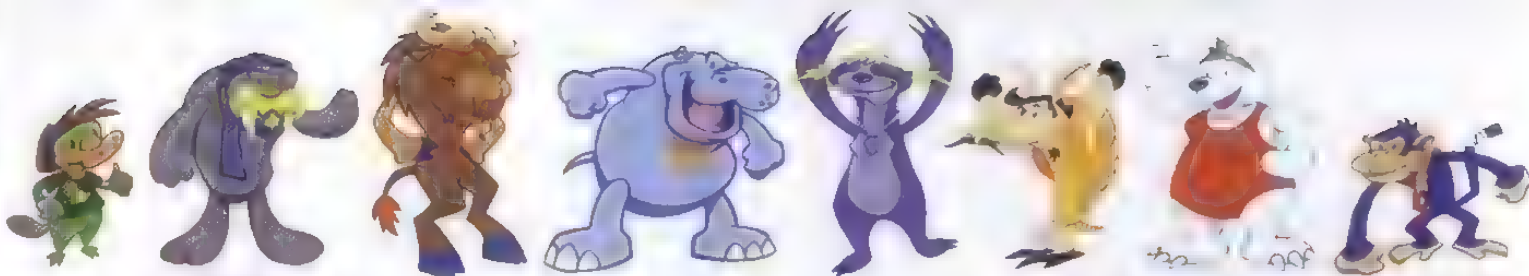
Achievement unlocked. Warm Glow of Fatherhood

Quit

PS3 Buzz! shows *Scene It* how it should be done

It doesn't matter that it's superficial! Yes, it does

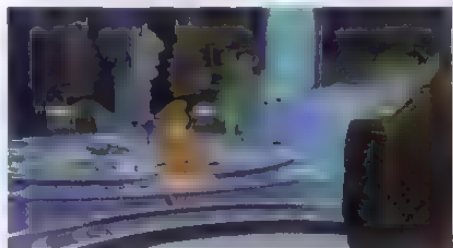
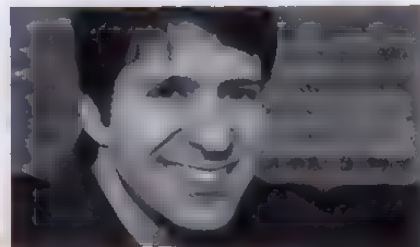
So rarely gets past the first hurdle, does it?



INTERVIEW

A party political game

Bungie's co-founder talks about the impact of Stairmasters on Wideload's latest, and the makeup of a political animal



The minigames can be swayed in your favour by teaming up with another animal – you'll share those votes, but crush your opposition

Games and politics – it's one of those conjunctions that make you go "eek!" Funny enough, that's also what most of the cast of Wideload Games' *Hail To The Chimp* do. A solid party-game first and foremost, *Hail To The Chimp* has ten characters all running for the Presidential Seal of the Animal Kingdom – from Santos the artistic armadillo to Murgatroyd, an



"We didn't plan to coincide with the US election. When we started we didn't even know who'd be running, so we got lucky that there's been so much excitement"

inscrutable jellyfish who's fond of sunglasses – all reported through the eyes of the GRR News Network. We spoke to **Alex Seropian**, president of Wideload Games, about the law of the jungle

Why did you make a game about politics?

We didn't really start off intending to do a game about politics. We wanted to make a multiplayer game, a game that you could pick up and get into

really quickly and play with friends. Humour's a big part of what we do, and we wanted it to appeal to different types of players, both the core gamers and people who are outside the

core gamers. We wanted it kind of fast, a little slapstick, and then maybe a deeper satire.

Is that why you chose to work with animals?

We came up with this idea of using animals as the protagonists, and then had the thought, "What if they were having an election?" They'd probably do it better than we do! Then what about delivering the experience through the eyes of the media – I'd

be on the Stairmaster at the gym watching CNN and you see these political attack ads and they're funny. Then I'd go on YouTube and search for political attack ads and be rolling on the floor.

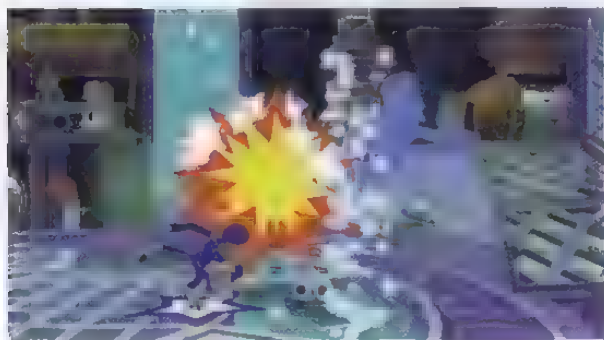
If you look at the stuff we did with the 'One Mission, Two Positions!' slogans, it doesn't make much sense if you think it out. But that's a regular political ad, right? It was so ripe for humour and as a concept it was so tight. To have [Woodchuck] Chumley (the GRR News anchor) set up the match, and then recap the results, just works.

Is the game deliberately timed?

We didn't plan to coincide with the election. We just lucked out. When we started we didn't even know who'd be running, so I think we got lucky that there's been so much excitement over our crazy human election.

Are you worried about the humour crossing over to audiences outside the US?

I was scratching my head about that, we think it's funny, but will anyone else? YouTube – what a great resource – you go on there and start looking at political news coverage in Europe and Asia and, if you don't have the sound on, it looks exactly the same. I think CNN drove that kind of format: the motion graphics, the dude in the suit, the ticker, it's all there. Sometimes, though, they have a blue background instead of a red one.



Each round is prefaced by a report from Woodchuck Chumley, anchorman par excellence, and after the game itself the votes are tallied and the game returns to GRR's studio for in-depth analysis of the results. Watch out for the 'attack ads' and TV spots as well, gradually unlocked throughout, which are lethally observed.

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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Fatal Frame: Mask Of The Lunar Eclipse

FORMAT: WII PUBLISHER: TECMO



Suda 51 waves the magic wand again, this time casting a more sinister spell over Tecmo's chilling ghost watch. Given the rather sorry sights of *Silent Hill 5*, the Wii exclusivity comes as a relief.

1942: Joint Strike

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM



Capcom's flight into the online arcade climbs, finally, after *Rocketmen: Axis Of Evil*. The question is: how will fans take to a vertically scrolling shooter that's wider than it is tall?

Spectrobes: Beyond The Portals

FORMAT: DS PUBLISHER: DISNEY



The hugely successful sci-fi RPG gets its sequel, developed again by Kyoto's Jupiter Corp. New excavation and battle features join an online battle system, a new 3D view aided by an in-game map.

Mad Max

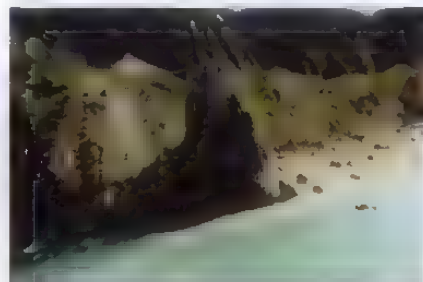
FORMAT: TBA PUBLISHER: EA



The Edge office gets its first thrill-o-meter so it can burst at news of George Miller's latest project. With *God Of War 2* director Cory Barlog on board, this revisits the ill-fated *Fury Road* sequel.

MotorStorm 2

FORMAT: PS3 PUBLISHER: SCE



Evolution quits *Monument Valley* (with angry Navajo shamans in hot pursuit, no doubt) to take on the world. The tropical venue sounds interesting, but was another CG trailer the best idea?

Top Spin 3

FORMAT: 360, DS, PS3, WII PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES



The long superior tennis game finally ditches Tim Henman in favour of one Andy Murray, though Rafael Nadal is a PS3 exclusive. Legend characters include Boris Becker and Björn Borg.

Soul Nomad

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: KOEI



Choosing a release date somewhere in between late and never, Koei brings Nippon Ichi's warmly-received *Soul Cradle* to the UK in June. Except a standard conversion of September's US release.

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

FORMAT: PS3 PUBLISHER: SCE



The European re-release, available now, upholds a long tradition of bonus content. Drift Mode sets up drift evaluation zones along the various tracks, while splitscreen racing has been added.

Iron Man

FORMAT: 360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, WII PUBLISHER: SEGA



A *Crimson Skies*-meets-Superman vibe runs through the latest trailer: the novelty contextual attacks suggesting an otherwise typical superhero brawl. Better, surely, than *Superman Returns*?

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

The *Boxhead* series has always been of a decent standard, but with this fifth iteration it makes the jump from five-minute fun into something of afternoon-swallowing proportions.

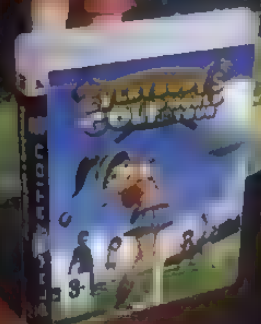
The Zombie Wars blends the usual undead shooting with RTS elements in the form of barricades, turret guns and barrels that can be used to fend off the ever-encroaching masses – and in this iteration, they're quickly filling the entire screen, closing off escape routes, and generally being a nasty inconvenience.

Your character, the admirable John Bambo, starts off with only basic abilities but levels up relatively quickly (and there's a possible 999x EXP multiplier), and it's not long before you're painting the entire screen red with the blood of insurmountable hordes.

Technically, this is a superb achievement. More importantly, however, it's a great game with the depth to complement its pyrotechnics. Tonight, my zombie friends, we dine in hell!

3+

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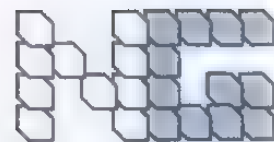


Easy to play enough to make it Everybody's Golf 3 is an interactive game that everybody can enjoy, whether it's instant four player mode or using the incredible online play to compete against up to 8 other players. Are you the best in your town? Well, how about the world?

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What gamers bought

Is the iPhone a player?

Apple has recently demonstrated that iPhone has the technical capabilities to support interesting new game design, and is offering downloadable distribution that could be attractive for both publishers and consumers. But can iPhone really compete with other handheld games devices, or is it just another mobile phone? We present a balanced view from analysts and developers and speculate on the kinds of games it will deliver.

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For starters, not many games...

...and the data shows that...

The analysis features leading news that...

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Hardware such as Halo 3 have outside...

in a multi-platform approach covered in...

single-platform exclusive, it shows what...

publishers are using the work, and which are...

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EDGE CONTENT AND BLOG

If you've missed a recent issue of Edge, you can now head to Next-Gen to read and discuss a selection of features, reviews and previews from the magazine. And, on the Edge blog, you'll find extra interviews, reports and news that we can't fit on these pages. Recent entries include:

- More from Gamecock's EIEIO event, including a look at Timegate's upcoming FPS, *Section 8*.
- A gallery of the, if we may say so, fine T-shirts we've made for new subscribers of the magazine over the last five years.
- We test a couple of new peripherals, the electric-shock giving Mindwire V5 and the remarkable (and remarkably named) mind reading Neura Impulse Actuator game controller from OCZ Technologies.



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MMOGs: risk vs reward

Analyst Piers Harding-Rolls examines the gambles involved in publishing premium online games

It is clear that for those companies that succeed, the MMOG subscription model can be extremely lucrative and benefits disproportionately from scale. In other words, once past a certain level of subscribers, operating expenses' impact on profit margins falls heavily, allowing for great returns. Operating profit for well-adopted premium subscription MMOGs can reach as high as 70 per cent and are routinely around 50 per cent, representing fantastic margins,

Our research shows that licensing of well-known IP is not enough to overcome other strategic failings, and as such can have minimal impact on business risk

which are higher than many other online entertainment opportunities.

The financial success of *WoW* since the end of 2005 - we estimate that this title alone has generated more than £700 (\$1,400) million in western subscription revenues since launch - has prompted significant investment in the sector. Many publishers that were not active in MMOGs but have been tracking the success of

Blizzard and Vivendi have been looking at ways to access this lucrative sector or to adopt MMOG-like strategies for their content to drive revenue growth. Screen Digest MMOG research also shows a market that is growing strongly, with more content than ever before and more gamers involved. It would appear, therefore, that investing heavily in MMOGs and collecting a substantial return on this investment represents a straightforward strategic decision for the game's publisher. In fact, although the rewards are substantial for those that succeed, the likelihood of failure is higher than ever in a sector dripping with risk.

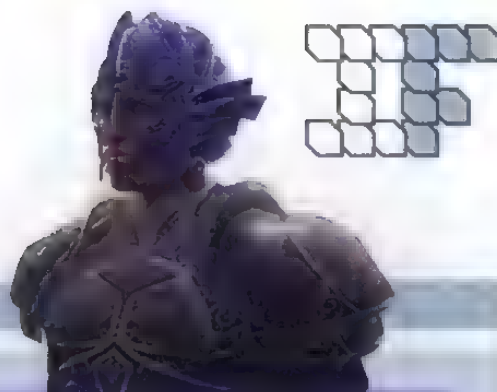
For one thing, competition in the subscription sector is currently at its peak. Growth in the market has prompted new market entrants from a number of different directions; some have expanded from their local markets in Korea and China to take a slice of the pie, while other traditional game publishers have increased their exposure to what is considered a high growth games market opportunity. Although more gamers than ever are playing MMOGs, the increase in subscription content is not commensurate with the growing opportunity.

The other key factor about the nature of the competition in the incumbent subscription market is that much of the revenue is concentrated at the very top of the market. The fact that only ten titles accounted for 85 per cent of 2006 western subscription revenue confirms a market that is teeming with commercial risk. This competitive situation is compounded by the market domination of *WoW*, a title that is expected to have a lifespan of a good few years yet. In 2006, *WoW* alone represented 54 per cent of the subscription market in North America and Europe. Unfortunately, the reality is that many subscription MMOGs in development will fail commercially, as the market is shared between only a handful of titles.

Additionally, the service nature of MMOGs means there is an ongoing financial burden on publishers beyond the launch of the game. If take-up of a title is below expectation, the



Fury - Auron has hit the financial rocks since the launch of the game, which gave an underwhelming performance



ongoing service and content development costs involved in maintaining MMOGs often results in service closure to stem losses. This means that with all the talk of the opportunity offered by the long shelf life of MMOGs, there is still heavy pressure to deliver a certain level of success in the early weeks following launch

Lastly, developing a winning MMOG strategy that can be packaged up and transferred to future MMOG releases is incredibly hard. Even those publishers that have a track record of success are unable to guarantee the success of future titles due to the complex nature of the market, its ever changing competitive climate and the demands of its consumers. As there are many important elements to a successful strategy, the failure of one of these elements is enough to undermine the potential of a title in a highly competitive sector

So what are publishers doing to mitigate the risk of a highly competitive subscription market? Within the world of high-end, paid-for online games, publishers are increasingly looking to acquire content IP from other media sectors such as television, film and music. This content strategy mirrors the approach of publishers in the console sector and represents an effort to connect with the consumer through an established entertainment brand. Our research shows, however, that licensing of well-known IP is not enough to overcome other strategic failings, and as such can have minimal impact on business risk



Sega's remaining company assets were acquired by SOE after Vanguard's poor performance. Microsoft Game Studios pulled the plug on *Marvel Universe* due to 'an inability to compete'

Other publishers wishing to access the market and looking to avoid spiralling development costs have imported cheaper MMOG content from Asia. So far many of these titles have failed to make an impact on the subscription market, highlighting the challenges of importing Asian MMOG content for the western consumer.

Other companies, a number of which originate from industries outside of games, are looking to develop new, often more casual, MMOG experiences targeted at new consumer groups. These games largely utilise alternative business models – advertising and virtual item sales – that offer a far lower consumer barrier to entry compared to subscription models and, importantly, are generally far less expensive to develop than traditional premium MMOGs. We expect revenue streams from alternative business models, particularly virtual items sales and advertising, to grow strongly over the next five years. Although these new business models and content strategies also bring new challenges – such as higher customer turnover and many new types of competitor – they offer a less risky way to access the potential upside offered by the MMOG model

Titles recently closed or had development halted

TITLE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
Lineage	SPACETIME STUDIOS	NCSOFT
STAR TREK ONLINE	PERPETUAL ENTERTAINMENT	
ENDLESS SAGA	WEBZEN	WEBZEN



2006 western subscription market share (%)



WORLD OF WARCRAFT ■
OTHERS ■

2006 western subscription market (%) – Top ten titles account for 85 per cent



TOP TEN SUBSCRIPTION MMOGS ■
OTHERS ■



Gotta catch 'em all

Game producer Brick Bardo raises a glass to the Japanese fixation with collection



There is a saying in Japan: "When you love, it is with your life." Or something like that. Originally people said this when they wanted to describe a particularly romantic person but, more recently, it has come to be used when talking about someone with any extreme passion or obsession. Now, I know that collectors are

numerous worldwide, but I really believe it's a kind of obsession which particularly qualifies the Japanese, and something that emerges naturally in the games we create.

I was told recently that a third of the jazz records ever produced are to be found in Japan, along with more bootleg rock records than in either the US or the UK. People here will think nothing of owning a particular whiskey that has been produced in a series of fewer than a hundred bottles. It's a trait that extends throughout Japanese life and culture - I think that at least half of the Japanese population could

easily enter that category of collectors. It is almost a natural disposition for the Japanese: whether their obsession is whiskey, movies, music or games.

It's also a matter of precision that defines my fellow Japanese and their various passions. When the Japanese do something, it is rarely in a rough way - but rather collections are strictly organised, placed into databases with careful classification.

The compulsion to collect and order things is something developers need to be really aware of. Not simply because games are collectable, but because the systems in the games need to cater to the Japanese obsession with collection.

This compulsion to collect and order things is something about which developers here need to be really aware. This is not simply because the games themselves are collectable items, but because the systems in the games also need to cater to the Japanese obsession with collection.

In the west, bonuses are a lot about competing, advancing through some rank system and achieving some title that others can respect.

Unlocking a new mission or difficulty setting are also common ways to encourage advancement. But in Japan, it's all about collection. Defeating an enemy will make its name appear in some in-game encyclopaedia. Each item gets attributed a number and is classified in a database that players can access at any time. Cards can also be gathered. And all this is just the stuff in the game - let's not

even talk about all the figurines and merchandise that are available to the obsessed Japanese gamer.

What's fascinating about this is that no aspect of the act of collection has any real impact on the game itself. Yet, particularly in RPGs, players will often decide to restart the game from the very beginning when they realise that they missed one single item in the course of their play. Some would just give up on the game altogether.



Clearly, the ability to accumulate items, many of which have no other value than to be collected keys into a Japanese mania, but, as developers have learnt, this obsession isn't indiscriminate. Should your game have a limited number of collectibles, players will be critical of it. Should you offer a huge number of items, but with little to differentiate them – say, only a simple change in colour or name – then, again, players would be pretty annoyed. The trick is to offer a moderate level in the number of items available, and with a distinct visual style for each. Even if those items are otherwise meaningless, then gamers will quickly start obsessively collecting, unable to tolerate a single hole in their clean and organised list.

Just as the Japanese feverishly collect whiskeys and old music, so they approach the games they play. We just love to collect. Me? I love a good single malt – there's no better place for them than Tokyo. Of course, as addictive as they are, games have a little way to go before they can give me an obsession that tastes as good as that.



Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales March 3-9

Software (lifetime sales):

1. Ryu Ga Gotoku Kenzan (Sega, PS3): 177,897 (new entry)
2. Gundam Musou Special (Koei, PS2): 55,372 (203,500)
3. Wii Fit (Nintendo, Wii): 50,118 (1,639,145)
4. Smash Brothers X (Nintendo, Wii): 47,241 (1,445,383)
5. Metroid Prime 3: Corruption (Nintendo, Wii): 34,151 (new entry)
6. Soma Bringer (Nintendo, DS): 17,158 (new entry)
7. Wii Sports (Nintendo, Wii): 16,476 (2,798,041)
8. Musou Orochi (Koei, PSP): 14,985 (94,957)
9. Doraemon (Sega, DS): 14,541 (new entry)
10. Minna No Joshikuryoku TV (Nintendo, Wii): 13,893 (new entry)

Hardware:

1. PSP: 65,596
2. Wii: 51,242
3. DS: 45,371
4. PS3: 21,413
5. PS2: 8,795
6. Xbox 360: 2,505
7. GBM: 356
8. GBA SP: 125

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The Gadget Magazine



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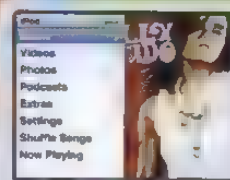
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Grand Theft Auto 4



Now we're desperate to get lost in a new Liberty City, anticipating that deliciously disorientating sensory overload you get on taking your first steps in a *GTA* game.
360 PS3 ROCKSTAR

Grand Theft Auto 4



Piling in a stolen police car with your actual best friends and tearing across the city, backseat driving devolving to threats, insults and humiliation – laughing all the way.
360 PS3 ROCKSTAR

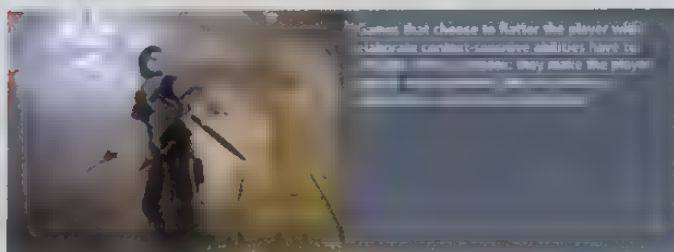
Grand Theft Auto 4



Have we made it clear yet that we're a bit eager to get involved in the full, unadulterated Niko Bellic experience? Perhaps you're looking forward to it, too.
360 PS3 ROCKSTAR

Context is everything

Does cinematic action defy player control?



Interface is the final barrier between player and game. It makes sense that we should try to simplify the way we control things, to make gaming more intuitive and natural – an extension of our own desires and actions. Games currently try this in a number of ways. Obviously, the Wii provided a closer match between the behaviour of player and avatar. Some games gloss over the details of control, so the player can concentrate on the larger picture, the high-level decisions. Think of the way *Ocarina of Time*'s Link leaps gaps automatically, or how your fleet in *Sins Of A Solar Empire* automatically (and competently) engages enemies. *The Sims 3* reduces the intensive micromanagement of your people-pets so you can concentrate on the larger picture of developing their characters and determining the stories that involve them.

But there's another way in which games seek to elicit radical action from minimal player input: context sensitivity. It's an area where the right balance has yet to be struck. Certainly, *Fable 2*'s combat looks thrilling, the camera swings close to the action as your avatar plants a sword in a monster's

face or boots a bandit off a cliff. And yet such melee moves, no matter how elaborate or how gorgeously shot, are all activated by one button – the result determined by context: where, who and how many you're fighting. But in order for the player's agency to remain intact, should the result of a context-sensitive command really be a matter of discovery?

Isn't there a necessity that an avatar's actions be in line with the player's intention? *Mirror's Edge* may only use one 'up' button and one 'down' button to perform acrobatic moves such as wall runs, flips, dives and rolls, but the player can anticipate precisely which move will be activated because the context is under control – you determine the speed at which your avatar runs, where and therefore also the manner in which your simple button press will be modified. *Fable 2* faces the challenge of ensuring that players continue to feel in control rather than reduced to a spectator, passively fuelling cinema with the occasional button press. In a roleplaying game such as this, a disconnect between player and character is anathema.



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Fracture
360 PS3

FORMA 360
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER LIONHEAD
ORIGIN UK
RELEASE CHRISTMAS
PREVIOUSLY IN £180



One way to make money in *Fable 2* is by gambling. In fact, you don't even need to be playing *Fable 2* in order to make money in *Fable 2*. Molyneux revealed that there would be a number of standalone Xbox Live Arcade games developed by entirely different studios, that would allow you to take your winnings and transfer them straight into the world of *Fable 2* and spend. In this way, it's hoped to broaden the game's appeal enticing in casual gamers intrigued by all this virtual money. But it's important that *Fable 2* has a good deal of content of its own – it would be worrying if other, less honourable developers followed suit by breaking up their own offerings.

Fable 2

The hype continues to mount for the game that claims to make you fall in love – but just which promises will it actually deliver?

If Peter Molyneux's popularity has been hurt by his tendency to over-promise, then it was not evident at GDC where an obligingly rapt audience had queued round the block in order to hear the latest on Lionhead's sequel to the Xbox's action RPG. Nor did Molyneux's propensity for making large claims appear diminished, labelling his talk, 'Fable 2 - The Big Three Features Revealed'. It turns out that *Fable 2* will have drama, combat and co-op. Who would have guessed?

The environment becomes an essential part of your arsenal; stand near a wall, hit the melee button and you might flip off it to slam a knee into an enemy's face

Of course, Molyneux's grandstanding aside, it is not the presence of those features but the manner of their implementation that is remarkable. Molyneux has spoken before about putting an entire combat system on one button, and here he reiterated his desire for anyone, even someone who has never touched a joystick before, to be able to pick up and play *Fable 2* immediately. It turns out that there are now three buttons – one for melee attack, one for ranged weaponry and one for magic. A game-naïve person might be able to trounce a pack of enemies

using only one, but the number of experience points you get from each victory increases as you mix combat styles and use the environment to best effect. And given that combat is entirely context-sensitive in *Fable 2* the environment becomes an essential part of your arsenal; stand near a wall, hit the melee button and you might flip off it to slam a knee into an enemy's face. Attack whilst near an object lying on the floor and your character will kick it into someone's automatic – it's the realisation of a



One over-arching goal of *Fable 2* is accessibility – and that's not just in terms of control. In connecting the game with standalone Arcade titles Lionhead has made it much easier for casual players to discover the game.

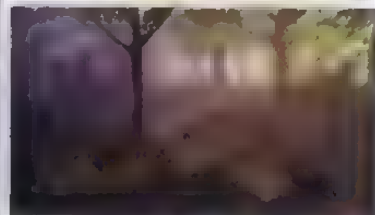
entry, tying player ability to tangible things such as speedier character progression and, more importantly, visual drama.

When Molyneux talks of drama, however, he isn't referring to *Fable 2*'s cinematic flair. Nor does he mean the adherence to a particular narrative. Although there is a plot – one which Molyneux claims will challenge your morality like never before – the real drama is in how reactive the world of Albion feels. The people you encounter appreciate you for what you do, commenting on your recent behaviour and changing their

mantra heard echoing throughout GDC this year: simplicity and depth. You don't need a complex system for combat to be rich and rewarding, so the claim goes – and if additional experience points aren't enough of an incentive, then *Fable 2* ensures that experimentation leads to flashy camera angles, jump cuts and slow motion sequences. High scores are a goal that seem arbitrary to the uninitiated, and I knew the intimidating sequences of buttons that are required in many a beat 'em up – but *Fable 2* smartly erases the barrier to



Fable 2 minimises interface – there's no mini-map, an apparently strange omission to a game that permits free-roaming. Instead, the path between objectives is marked out by a dynamic 'breadcrumb trail' of sparkly lights.





The developers hope to make the world feel important to the player by putting it at risk of permanent catastrophic change – but will Lionhead get cold feet and implement a safety switch to prevent NPC killing when playing online?



disposition towards you appropriately. Townsfolk for whom you have performed a favour will shower you with gifts. Your children will try to emulate your behaviour, becoming vicious little proto-thugs if you misbehave or saccharine angels if you pursue the course of righteousness. Absentee parents will return to be berated by their forlorn offspring and given the cold shoulder by their estranged spouse.

Such a situation arose as Molyneux played live with co-op partner Josh Atkins of Microsoft Game Studios. Molyneux's female character hadn't returned home for six months, and the husband was not best pleased, launching into a tirade that was brought to an abrupt end by Atkins' gun. The ability to enter into another player's world and actively destroy all that they have carefully cultivated is a line few titles have dared to cross – but here Molyneux's husband will stay dead, his child will be packed off to the orphanage. Player behaviour has a significant and permanent effect on the world, and, as this cautionary tale proves, the world of those with whom you play.

Clearly, the ability to form a family at all is a major means by which Molyneux hopes the game's world will capture the player's emotions. Playing as either gender, you can find a partner, marry them, conceive children and have a family. Swollen bellies and bosoms are present and correct – Molyneux jokingly remarks that the labour minigame he had planned was a step too far. Then there's your dog. More than a companion, the dog is also a replacement for a HUD. He will act as your lookout, alerting you to any dangers along the path and, more significantly, encourage you to step off that



Although the exact method has yet to be revealed, Molyneux did say that wooing a prospective partner involves finding 'romance points' located near scenic views. Apparently, the dog then informs you when you are pregnant.

path, to walk away from your immediate goal and explore the world.

The hope is that, with your emotions engaged, your choices become far weightier, compounded by the fact that your behaviour will have repercussions far down the line for both your own character, your family and the world. As with *Fable*, you will change in appearance depending on your behaviour, but this time the choices will be less binary, making it harder to be the shining knight. Molyneux points to a moment some six hours into the game where you are asked to

sacrifice something dear to you for the greater good, challenging your moral sensibilities. Equally, however, Molyneux says that being truly evil will be even less palatable than before, pointing out the surprising statistic that only ten per cent of *Fable's* players took to the dark side with any fervour. This time, Molyneux says, no more than five per cent will have the stomach for it. Virtuous or evil? However it looks, your family will lean for a rough ride: the real test of *Fable 2* will be just how much we really care.



FORMAT PS3
PUBLISHER SEGA
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN JAPAN
RELEASE OUT NOW (JAPAN)
TBC (US/UK)

Yakuza Kenzan

Party time in the wild, wild east, in a prequel that's every inch a sequel

Quiet, lingering scenes of cherry blossom fall. Plucked strings and austere flute music. Muted showdowns between static swordmasters. You expect certain motifs from a game staged in traditional, historic Japan – Edo period, 1605, in *Yakuza Kenzan's* case – but no, not here. *Kenzan* introduces itself not with a humble, bowed shuffle, but with

the culture clash. Just like the first two *Yakuza* games on PS2, *Kenzan* is so money even when it's fronted by a relatively penniless, down-at-heel samurai.

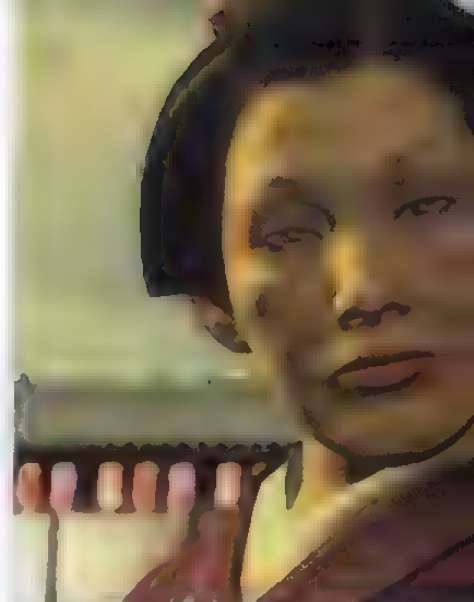
That samurai is the ancestor of Kazuma Kiryu, the star of the aforementioned PS2 titles: his ion-handsome features intact instead of the gangster-code dragon tattoo swirled along his spine, it's now printed

Kenzan dives straight into the dirt. An opening mission, a trawl to introduce you to the town, asks the following: what would you like to be paid in? Money or women?

boombox bling, with a hip-hop-powered montage of in-game action, soundtracked by ZEEBRA's 'Bushido' (available in Japanese stores now, apparently, see 'Like a dragon? Buy these'). Such braggadocio has long been the bane of painfully self-conscious street-centric videogames, but here it feels like the most natural announcement around, despite

across the back of his robe. Unlike his clean-cut, mob-established descendant, Kiryu's opening game beginnings are much lower key. Laid sleeping or occasionally puffing on his pipe (indeed, his idle animation has him reaching for his pipe, and swiftly so). *Kenzan* dives straight into the underworld dirt through which Kiryu strives to shine, with an opening cutscene centred on the district's pleasure girl trade. An opening mission, a simple trawl to introduce you to the town, asks the following: what would you like to be paid in? Money or women? And that trawl is a vibrant one, every bit as heady as Kazuma's jogs through the restless, neon-bathed sin city of the original. A festival of bands perform on waist-high floats in the narrow streets, while Geishas amble alongside doddering, grinning pensioners with their dogs. There's just as much of a buzz amongst the townsfolk, each of whom can be sent sprawling if you're not careful with your running. Kiryu's hands clutching his belt as he trots along.

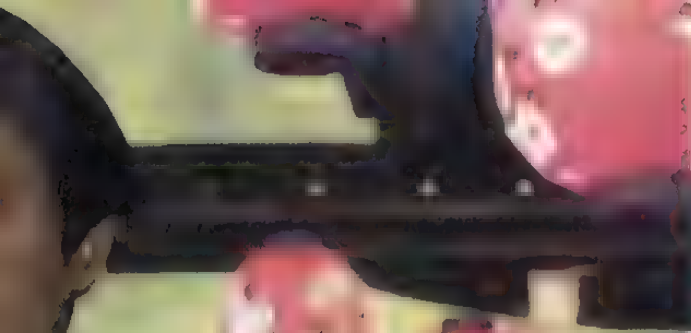
Enjoy this taste of freedom. Once it's over



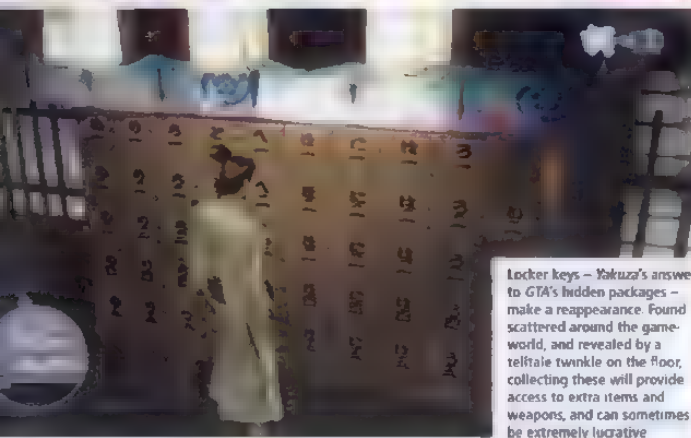
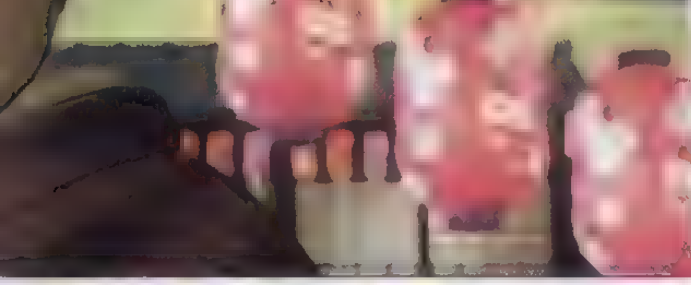
Swords initially seem limiting compared to bare-knuckle combat, but can build your special meter swiftly, including a slash whose flourish can be held in order to build power. New moves can be learnt from a variety of masters smuggled away within the game.



It's time for a two-hour trek of foreshadowing, as this origin story starts revealing its own origins. You're sent several years previous, joining Kiryu as he teaches swordwork to students in a remote dojo. Approached and recruited for the local shogun's troop, it's here that Kiryu meets with Majima, the ancestor of the shrill-eyed patched psycho who opposed Kazuma in the first game. Even though their meeting erupts into a scuffle over booze, their relationship here is less malevolent. One assassination mission and one brutal betrayal later, Majima has lost his eye, you've discovered the origin of the adopted Kiryu name, and beer schooled in *Kenzan's* four styles of combat, selectable with the D-pad during battle. Bare-fist is the most recognisable, using throws, grapples and nearby props for bar brawl pummellings. The remainder are blade disciplines – single shortsword, single longsword and dual wield. These are gorier but less scrappy, and those who found *Yakuza's* combat system to lack a certain sickness will retain their hang-ups, despite its improved flexibility. This is still about viciously ashing out within a crowd of foes rather than precision-assassination, about blows rather than flow. But if you enjoyed it, then



Cutscenes are lengthy and profuse, but such rumination doesn't snag thanks to the facial detail. It's the expressions of age that are most captivating, realising not just young and old, but many tangible shades in between



Locker keys – Yakuza's answer to GTA's hidden packages – make a reappearance. Found scattered around the game-world, and revealed by a tell-tale twinkle on the floor, collecting these will provide access to extra items and weapons, and can sometimes be extremely lucrative



Out of town, Kenzan's more remote locations are flat rather than flattering. Banks of terse texturing, blank fields and angular roofs – it's almost a relief to get a fight going and let the fine character detailing brighten the place up

there's still that familiar swaggering rush, blood spatters walls and screens, groups of defeated thugs are refreshed by mini cutscenes of more cocky punkheads joining the fray, and the fight music has no qualms about guitar rock-outs (minus the sax, sadly).

From there, it's on to visit a pleasure house (with a monk, of course) and, another stretch of cutscenes and confrontations later, you're whipped back to Kiryu's present. And here's the thing: even though you've not yet had much leeway to frolic in Kenzan's sand, it's proper you'll know by now whether or not you'll want to bother. That sticky but gratifying combat (and the prospect of not being able to roam a given area for long without being drawn into a random fight) and the lingering cinematics that value everything each character has to say – these are the things that dictate how much you'll connect more so than any non-linear side questing.

One generation of hardware forward, several generations of Yakuza back. You can take it as either reassurance or dissonance, as on that the heart of the experience retains so much that's recognisable – in terms of genre and attitude, as well as structure – despite having stepped some 400 years into the past.



If the hostess bars – choose a girl, and attempt to win love hearts through your choice of food, drink and stimulating conversation – lose their charm too quickly, there's always the gambling den, and the heady delights of tortoise racing



Understandably unlikely to survive the conversion process, the Japanese release of Yakuza Kenzan is bundled with Kamutai magazine, a booklet that's as much promotion by the game as promotion for the game. Aside from character detail, actor profiles, maps and features – including saucy female costumes and a rhythm-action minigame that takes place in cleavage – there's a bonanza of real-world tie-ins ready to both buffer and benefit from Kenzan's sales. T-shirts, music, jewellery and even noodles... It's perhaps a blessing that adverts didn't exist in 1605



FORMAT PS3
 PUBLISHER UBISOFT
 DEVELOPER FREE RADICAL
 ORIGIN UK
 RELEASE MAY
 PREVIOUSLY IN E164, E176

Haze

A final look at Free Radical's latest just before it goes over the top

Watching *Haze's* development from the outside has been a strange experience. After an initial rush of information the November release date came and went, and the month-by-month delays that followed didn't inspire confidence, although whether that was more to do with Ubisoft's financial statements or hesitancy on the part of Free Radical isn't clear. But things are funny sometimes: behind what looked like a stuttering and slightly troubled end to development, Free Radical has taken the time to refine *Haze* beyond expectations. And this just may have produced a console FPS that you can't compare to the usual suspects.

Looking at screens of the Mantel troopers might seem to belie that. After all, here are



The Mantel dropship, which you'll be seeing rather a lot of throughout the game, resupplies your equipment and takes you to new areas, which is all part of *Haze's* constant streaming – there are no loading screens here

black-garbed military men with guns, surely one of gaming's most overused archetypes. They're not even fantastically looking, and a long distance some of the textures are undeniably below the level expected on the PS3. Indeed, several elements of the game's world are visually unexceptional. It's a technical rather than an aesthetic failing, however, because the world of *Haze* has a distinct visual quality that's far removed from other titles in the genre. This can be as simple as the ubiquity of the Mantel logo to the more usual pleasures of watching your team spread out and take up cover effectively. It's a game that has managed to craft a world rather than a tech demo, and that means that the mud occasionally gets blocky close-up, you learn to live with it.

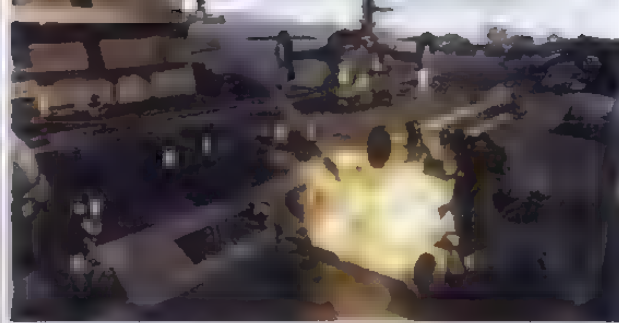
What's more important is that *Haze* feels good in the hands, to the extent you might even forget you're using a PS3 rather than a 360 controller. Your first steps as Shane

Carpenter are exhilarating once the use and purpose of Nectar has been explained: you stride through undergrowth with fellow Mantel troopers, popping off the bright targets that appear before you, merrily thwacking their floppy corpses into nearby trees and pulling up your visor to get a better view of an airstrike. Your fellow soldiers come across as deeply unpleasant, but their characterisation is more subtly sinister than any of the obvious nonsense occurring in the files of *Army Of Two*, and depend on you paying attention to throwaway remarks during gameplay as well as the implications of what they're saying in the cutscenes.

They fit their roles, of course, because playing as a Mantel trooper is an alpha male dream. You're faster, stronger, smarter and tougher than any opponent you face, only capable of a relentless, adrenaline-fueled rush to a new objective. Nectar is plentiful and you're soon pushing in and out of doses



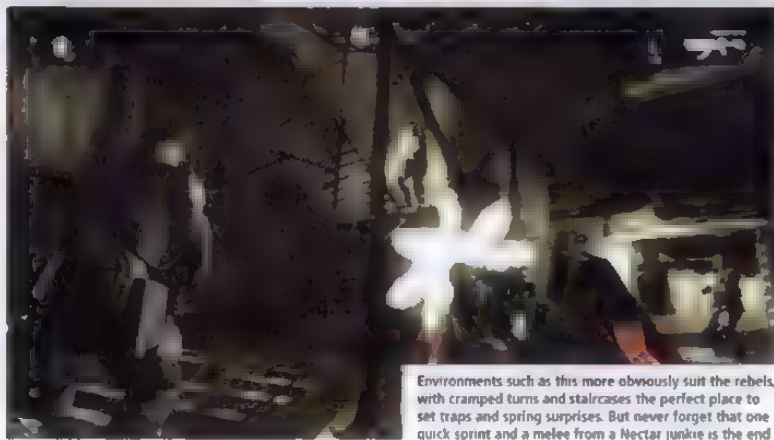
The troopers come in far more than just the simple vanilla flavour, and the shotgun-toting 'shock troops' on the left are horrible to come across in close quarters – though if you can turn them against their squadmates



The weapon set in *Haze* is broad, but covers all the expected FPS bases – including every driver's personal bugbear, the heat-seeking rocket launcher. It takes a little time to lock-on though, so if you're cute it can be avoided.



There are a few obvious 'inspired-by' moments, but a Mongoose that has a little bit more traction in the face of basic machine gun fire is always welcome.



Environments such as this more obviously suit the rebels, with cramped turns and staircases the perfect place to set traps and spring surprises. But never forget that one quick sprint and a melee from a Nectar junkie is the end

The enemies are marked out in yellow, your shooting's better, and you can see every pathetic trap they've laid in your path. You feel unstoppable, which, in a way, you are

as you settle into the levels' rhythm. As a group of enemies appear, you'll finger-automatically pull the analogue trigger like a syringe to increase your dosage, the screen momentarily blurs and then refocuses itself with a sharp pull. You feel unstoppable and you can see every pathetic trap they've laid in your path. You feel unstoppable.

Which, in a head-on guns blazing way you are. But a strange thing happens after a while: you get caught in one too many Nectar bombs thrown by the rebels, and accidentally kill your own teammates. Or you kill one rebel and three of his friends pop up, joining you with some Mantel weapons, you keep on triggering grenades they've

buried below sight of your Nectar-enhanced eyes. You get hit in the neck with a throwing knife. You get sniped. Most of all, despite all your power, you feel a little bit hurt.

This is the key to *Haze*: it's not one-sided but nor is it full of minor variants. You can either be a trooper or a rebel, and that choice dictates your, and your team's, entire strategy. Either a cunningly baited pump-and-adrenaline shock and awe, or crafty, sneaky, improvisatory, and environment-controlling tactics. The level design adds to this concentration of making each location a series of encounters that play out in different ways, on a ship, for example, you fight your way up and down stairs, cross a long gantry, drop into a more open space and take on

some snipers, all the while moving through a series of smaller spaces with the individual encounters. The attention to the player's movement through the level is quite brilliant at times, although only extended play will tell if it can maintain this standard throughout.

Haze also has the ubiquitous deathmatch, which makes distinctions even clearer as each team crosses through the elaborate maps and tries to play off the other. The only levels played on thus far were open and would have seemed to favour the Mantel squad, but both rounds saw a crushing rebel victory with some excellent use of the Nectar grenades. In the co-op campaign, which follows the same route as the singleplayer, the game can feel a little narrow at times but is nevertheless notous, particularly with vehicles, and the deleted scenes in the Team Assault mode should be worthy add-ons to the main campaign.

Perhaps *Haze* still looks a little underwhelming in places, and perhaps the cry of 'political game' will scare players away. It's neither. *Haze* looks like being first and foremost a brilliant current-generation shooter debut for Free Radical. Alongside that, there are individual scenes featuring subject matter few other pieces of entertainment go near. *Haze*'s excellent design is sustained throughout, then a single, its new narrative territory. It may be that it's established beats an excellent game that dares to treat us like adults.



The Promise Hand has several options for taking on the more powerful firepower of the Mantel troopers. Prime among these, if only for comic effect, is the Nectar grenade that can be created by strapping a dead trooper's Nectar feed to a standard explosive; this explodes in a yellow cloud that overdoses any Mantel troopers near it, making it impossible for them to distinguish friend from foe, see clearly, or even control their firing. As well as this, you can bury grenades in the ground (circumventing Nectar's ability to detect danger), make quick dodges, and play dead to let them walk on by. Best of all, Mantel armour is enough of a hindrance up close to let you disarm troopers before shooting them with their own guns. It's enough to put you off drugs forever.

FORMAT 360, PS3
PUBLISHER SEGA
DEVELOPER SECRET LEVEL
OR GIN US
RELEASE AUTUMN

Golden Axe: Beast Rider

As Secret Level dusts off a Sega classic, we find out if the old dog has been taught any new tricks

Each of the beasts in the game has different characteristics although avoiding an interplay of strengths and weaknesses that fits easily into the rock-paper-scissors model. The Abrax, a fire-breathing giant chicken-lizard, can sweep enemies aside with a thrash of its tail, the cheetah-like Lynth can butt enemies with its horns and perform sideways dodges at speed, the juggernaut-sized Krommath uses momentum to plough through obstacles and the Mirigore is a monstrous chimp best used against other beasts. The final creature is being kept under wraps, however.



Many characters and creatures are familiar. The Abrax strongly resembles the Chicken Leg beast from the original, and shares its tail attack – although this time round it breathes fire, too

Legacy content – people expect it, says senior producer **Nigel Cook**, explaining the return of the arcade classic's iconic features, with its roster of ludicrously-named characters and gnomes included. But the truth is that people expect a great deal more than just 'legacy content' – at a time when there is so much hacking and slashing to be had elsewhere, *Golden Axe Beast Rider* needs to raise its aspirations beyond knowing winks and nostalgic nods to a 19-year-old side-scrolling coin-op.

To its credit, *Beast Rider* does promise to be more than a button masher. Combat is tempo-based, with a sweet spot at the end of each swing that allows for combo attacks. Enemies glow before each strike, indicating what manner of attack is coming – some can

be evaded or parried, and a vicious cinematic kill is initiated by a successful dodge followed by a counter attack combo.

In fact, the game departs from the original in terms of gore – battle leaves enemies drawing their final breath through their necks or staring down at the mangled stump of their waist. Tougher enemies need to have their armour smashed off before they are vulnerable, and groups will become 'agitated' if their captain is killed, breaking a hoary hack 'n' slash taboo and attacking all at once. With a modest target of 15 combatants on screen at any one time, inadvertently skewering the captain can cause serious problems, although the alternative is that he provides a health boost to troops while alive. It's not quite tactical



The levels extend up to a square kilometre but, from what we've seen, progress is linear. Given the availability of transport, it will be something of a shame if there isn't more freedom to roam than there currently seems to be



nuance as such, but Secret Level has created a combat system with some depth – certainly in companion to the original.

This time, you play only as the returning bikini-clad barbarianette Tyns Flare. As before, mana and health can be retrieved by beating gnomes, who spring up from the ground and proceed to scurry about to no obvious end – an example of the 'legacy content' to which Cook refers, and a feature that will seem plainly odd to new players. Both Death Adder and the *Golden Axe* itself make a reappearance. However, the axe is now a magical attack powered up over successive missions: the means of defeating the game's bosses and, eventually, Death Adder himself. Also present, although in a more substantial form, is mounted combat. The five beasts' individual character stics are tricky to master, making them the most deadly weapon at your disposal but, equally, very vulnerable if not handled correctly. The result is that they act more as disposable power-ups than faithful companions.

The beasts help distance the game from competing hack 'n' slash titles but, gnomes and giant turtles aside, the unexceptional fantasy world of *Golden Axe* isn't really that compelling a fiction, despite the pervading nostalgia for the original game itself. You have to wonder what it really adds besides a veneer of kitsch. Nonetheless, Secret Level's effort to keep combat from sliding into thumb-thrashing promises some solidity, if not innovation, and the prospect of mounted combat offers variety. With a little kick in its spurs, *Beast Rider* may well cover the well-trodden ground of the hack 'n' slash genre at a respectable canter.



Beast Rider is certainly a more mature offering than its predecessors. As well as the blood spurts from your enemies' severed limbs, the build we saw featured an oh-so-shocking nipple or two





An immediately noticeable difference is how easy it is to drop people with gunfire, and how easy it is to scupper traffic by shooting a few drivers. Key tactics – get them here first



Grand Theft Auto 4

We love it when a plan comes together (and falls apart with the driver flying out through the windscreen)

It's not a new point to make, but *Grand Theft Auto's* greatness can be boxed down to any element: outside of the mechanics, the style and the feel of the game, it's the stories you create as you play. But though the stories you'll make playing *GTA4's* singleplayer might be exciting enough, it's those spun during time in its multiplayer that could rival some of the best game stories ever told.

There are a few fat notes in its various forms, and *GTA* isn't particularly suited to straight-up team deathmatch; for example, the mechanics and arena are simply not a fit for such competition. *GTA4's* world is simply too interesting, during most deathmatch

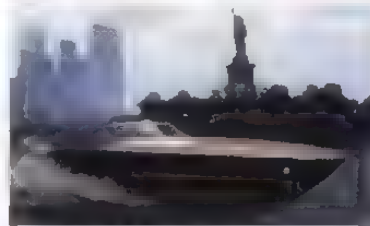
games you'll be wishing you could go and explore that alley or simply drive a car into the sunset without someone shooting at you with a rocket launcher.

Better is Team Mafia Work, which has all players receiving a mission at the same time via mobile, and racing to assassinate someone or collect an item. It's easy to imagine this becoming a firm favourite when players know the city intimately rather than the map-following lottery our inexperience made of it. *GTA Race's* throwaway fun is a partial resurrection of the *Midnight Club* series through backstreets, forgoing with its markers but dedicated primarily to the comedy value of getting people out of their cars and running them over.

But it's in *Cops n Crooks* that *GTA4's* multiplayer really takes off: a mode that offers a twist on the V/P/Marked Man genre and that grows organically from the singleplayer game. Two teams of four start: one team of cops in a patrol car, and one team of robbers on foot and a short distance away. One robber is the boss who must



There really is nothing like taking down a helicopter with a rocket launcher – especially when it's full of police trying to get a shot off at you. Less glamorous, but equally satisfying when done right, is sticking tightly to cover when escaping



The speedboat is the boss's escape vehicle, though he can still be shot while pulling out of the bay – we hope Rockstar has been careful with its sniping placements

reach a designated point on the map and escape on a speedboat. The robbers can see where the escape vehicle is, and the police can see where the robbers are. The setup is the foundation for gloriously emergent chaos as plans form and go awry by the second. The stories we experienced included a pursuit over a bridge that ended as bumper-to-bumper; the robbers managed to make the police car smash headfirst into another vehicle. The cops could have restarted the engine and only lost a few seconds—except the collision had sent the driver through the windscreen, over the edge of the bridge and into the water below. Score one for the crooks. In another chase, the robbers reached their boat with no cops in sight, got out of the car and were promptly sniped. In another, the cops cornered the crooks who escaped with a death-defying leap over a ramp and into a nearby alley—the cops tried the same, and fell agonisingly short as the laughing quarry drove off, waving goodbye.

Cops n Crooks hooks a classic multiplayer mechanic directly into the way all players engage with *GTA4's* world, and that's why it's such a riotous success. If it seems to overshadow *GTA4's* other multiplayer offerings, that's not to say they're by any means failures. It's simply that *Cops n Crooks* gets *GTA* multiplayer right in one fell swoop. Next to that achievement, almost any other option the game could offer seems irrelevant.

FORMAT 360, PS3
PUBLISHER TAKE TWO
DEVELOPER ROCKSTAR
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE APRIL 29
PREVIOUSLY IN: E187

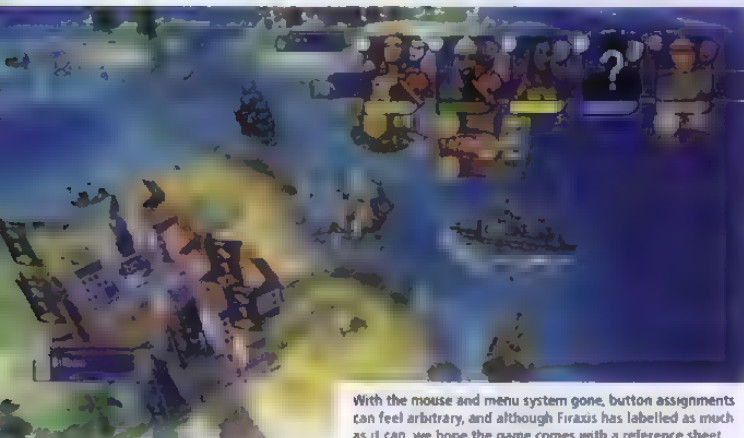


Hangman's Noose was the only co-op scenario on show at Rockstar HQ, and allowed for some considerable interplay beyond our first ham-fisted attempts. A 'business associate' has to be escorted from his plane, which the police have just surrounded, to a safe spot in the city. The details of how this was achieved aside, there was a moment when our gangster was left in the dust as the getaway van sped off. The SWAT team surrounded, the shots began piling in, and any escape route was cut off. It was at this point one of our gang returned in a Chinook and landed bang in the middle of the authorities, flattening a squad car and creating enough chaos for our man to run and jump into the side, before flying off into the sunset with the rest of the gang.

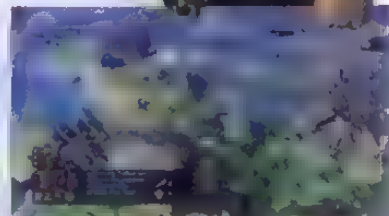
FORMAT 360, DS, PS3
PUBLISHER 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER FIRAXIS
ORIGIN US
RELEASE JUNE 6
PREVIOUSLY IN E181

Sid Meier's Civilization Revolution

The most fearsome leader of PC strategy advances further into console territory



With the mouse and menu system gone, button assignments can feel arbitrary, and although Firaxis has labelled as much as it can, we hope the game comes with a reference sheet



Winning *Civilization Revolution* with only one city – that's considered an Achievement of medium difficulty. The hard Achievements are things like playing a game against Meier himself. Despite the series' move to consoles, Firaxis is clearly still catering to the passionate, hardcore following that the *Civilization* series has amassed during its time on PC. Our first hands-on confirms that it has lost little of its complexity and depth during its redesign for consoles – but our time with the game also underlines that the real proof of *Revolution* will be in how easily that depth can be accessed without a mouse and keyboard.

The clear and concise display of information is no mean feat, however, and is universally applied from the tech tree to the city screens to the diplomacy window. Elsewhere, *Revolution* seems to be struggling to match the efficiency of its forebears. The simple act of navigating the world and selecting units remains frustratingly sluggish. As your viewpoint clunks from selected tile to selected tile you can't help but think how

much easier it would be with a flash of the mouse and a single click on the min-map.

It's not a problem that is easily solved, admittedly, but the current control system surely isn't the optimum compromise. Both analogue sticks are used in a similar manner, the right moving your active tile and the left dragging a movement path from the last unit to be selected, similar enough that it feels like there is some redundancy here but different enough that confusing their functions is irritating.

Overlook such teething troubles, however, and the game is otherwise brilliantly pitched. It's possibly the most coherently visualised *Civilization* to date

and without the PC's ability to display large quantities of information textually, that's not just of aesthetic importance. Then there's the emphasis on multiplayer, although there's no ability to save online games. *Revolution* allows players to drop in or out of a session instantly, with players relinquishing control to the AI as they leave. As with *Civilization IV*, multiplayer games synchronise the turns of competing players. The first player to finish his moves initiates a countdown, limiting the other players to a preset period before a new turn starts. It keeps things ticking, certainly, and creates a tension between the size of your empire and your ability to manage it within the time. There are some disadvantages to this: as in singleplayer, your viewpoint is periodically hijacked to show important events – but unlike in singleplayer, the synchronisation means it can happen while you are in the middle of trying to do something important.

The interface will be refined over the coming months – but there's a fear that it can only go so far, that the mouse will always be the preferred method of control. Equally, the game's attempt to retain the depth of previous versions may intimidate a new audience. If there is a sweet spot between these two points then it's going to be tricky to hit.

Three units of the same type can now be combined into an army and, after three victories, units can be upgraded to veteran status, giving them access to a range of skill-booster



The caricatures of famous leaders really are superbly animated – expressive and brilliantly comic, sweeping off-screen in a fit of pique when you have displeased them, or gabbling at you angrily in a *Sims*-esque nonsense language



The DS version, apparently running the same game as the 360 and PS3 versions, is probably lent a better interface by the stylus and menu system. The single issue we encountered was that when dragging a path away from a unit, the game occasionally confused this with the need to move the camera, causing incorrect commands to be issued – something that the developers cannot fail to spot and correct between now and June. It surprised us just how good a fit *Civilization* is for the handheld – particularly given its massively accelerated pace.



What we've not yet seen of *Clear Sky* is how it will be handling *Stalker's* messy PDA system. One of the weakest elements of the original game was the handling of information through this crude interface.

Stalker: Clear Sky

Careless stalk costs lives in a radioactive revisionist prequel

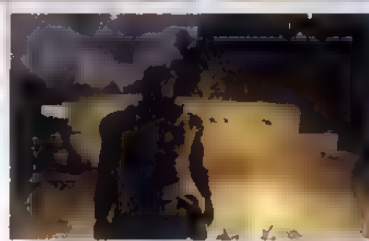
Somewhere, in the murky gap between what we want and what we actually get, there's a sense that games which simply allow us to explore aren't turning up frequently enough. The original Chernobyl-based shooter from Ukrainian developers GSC GameWorld disappointed some gamers by drawing us inexorably into its weird storyline and then not encouraging (or allowing) us to delve into its intricate world of dereliction. That and a number of other issues, should get addressed in *Clear Sky*, which is a prequel set in that same mutant-ridden exclusion zone in the depths of the Ukraine. Once again you take on the mantle of a stalker looking for riches and adventure, but this time you get to be rather more selfish with the story.

In *Clear Sky's* more open world there will be much more of a focus on allowing players to make their own way in the zone. The various factions which made an appearance in the original game will be better defined and will now have their own storylines, missions and AI interactions. Each faction will now have a definite HQ, with their own mission-dispensing commanders and helpful traders. You'll be working alongside the agents these factions have sent out into the zone, or coming into conflict with them.

While there was only a small selection of faction-based decisions we were able to make in the original *Stalker* game, *Clear Sky* will be all about deciding who you want help out, and who you want to kill. Decisions about who to shoot and who to talk to will



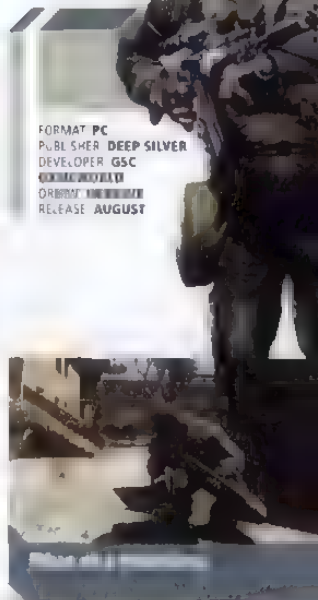
Enemies in *Clear Sky* will now use grenades against you. It might be more realistic, but will it end up with those annoying instant-death situations that plague less accomplished shooters?



While *Clear Sky* will both rehash old environments and supply new ones, everything in the zone will benefit from DX 10 visuals, allowing for unique wet texture effects.

take place dynamically out in the radioactive wilderness. Ultimately, GSC tell us, you'll be able to lead a single faction to victory.

The new game is also incrementally improving the original technology with the new DirectX 10 lighting making a huge difference to the look of the world. Those 'watery sheen' effects mean that it's even more dank and murky than ever before, making for far more detailed atmospheric horror amid the crumbling Soviet landscape. The real question, though, is not about GSC's visual talents, but whether the much-discussed A-Life artificial intelligence systems, which control interactions in the world once scripted events have been triggered, will really allow gamers to attain a sense of place and exploration. There has been a feeling that, despite GSC's claims, the living world systems it developed essentially took a back seat to the linear storyline that was so awkwardly delivered via NPCs and PDA messages. Allowing the game (and the gamer) to just get on with living in the zone could mean discovering more about what players actually want from the experimental end of FPS games.



FORMAT PC
PUBLISHER DEEP SILVER
DEVELOPER GSC
ORIGIN GAMES
DRIFT
RELEASE AUGUST

Clear Sky will take place a couple of years prior to the events of *Stalker*, and the world will reprise some areas while removing others. The city of Pripyat will be cut off entirely, for example. As a newly arrived mercenary you'll be able to do a bit of tourism before getting entangled in the conflicts between the factions from the original game. All the original groups – Monolith, the military, Freedom, Duty, the mercenaries and the bandits – are there, but there's also a new faction: *Clear Sky*. Finding out what they're up to, either by joining them or defeating them, should also shed light on exactly what *Stalker* was up to in the original game.

FORMAT PS3
 PUBLISHER SCE
 DEVELOPER SCE STUDIO LIVERPOOL
 ORIGIN UK
 RELEASE SUMMER

Wipeout HD

We've seen the year 2200, and it's 1080p

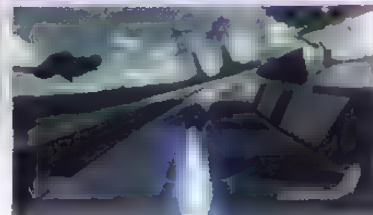
It's a series that has always revelled in a lusty gloss of the new, with its visions of precipitous futurist cities, screaming propulsion systems and vibrant advertising. It's why *Wipeout* came to represent the technical achievements of the PlayStation and PSP, and why *Wipeout HD*, its first representation on PS3, still has the capacity to captivate, even 13 years after the series began.

And that's despite the fact that *HD* consists of eight tracks, eight teams and a weapon-set that has been directly lifted from *Pure* and *Pulse*, *Wipeout*'s two incarnations on PSP. But the new graphical detail and clarity makes them feel quite different to what you may be used to. Its gleaming tracks are no longer flat surfaces but textured with divots and cavities that emphasise their materiality and your craft's speed but don't affect the smoothness of the ride, which feels more analogue and softer than in *Pulse* and *Pure*. Panoramas were impressive on the PSP's screen but are spectacular here, as are weapon effects. Craft feature Star Wars-like grime and scratches and the subtle lighting

A nice touch is the way the music quietsens on jumps, eking out those few airborne moments, before the action resumes once again on landing.



Pulse's simple-but effective photo mode returns in *HD*, producing some of the screenshots seen here, but it doesn't challenge *PGR*'s for features. It's here that the frozen smoke effect from a rocket's explosion can be savoured in full.



effects similarly tend toward the realistic. In short, *Wipeout HD* is superbly fresh.

The game structure is broadly similar to *Pulse* – single-player consists of a campaign comprising grids of varied events and Racebox, a mode for creating custom races or grids, as well as online multiplayer. Zone makes a triumphant appearance, with its tracks newly featuring a graphical representation of the music on the track surface that pounds with the beat, and a palette change every few zones that

dramatically washes past your craft. The music consists of some remixes of *Pure* and *Pulse*'s soundtracks and benefits hugely from being heard through a full speaker system.

Aside from a few current minor problems – inexplicable slight framerate dips during races and the Sixaxis' spongy triggers, which make the double-tap sideshift move hard to pull off until you edit the controls – *Wipeout HD* maintains its predecessors' legacy in spades. The future looks as bright as it ever did.

TrackMania DS

The cult stunt-driving favourite revs up for the biggest daredevil jump yet – from PC to DS

TrackMania has always been a PC game yearning for a shot at the consoles. Finally, it's made the leap, but the destination may prove somewhat surprising.

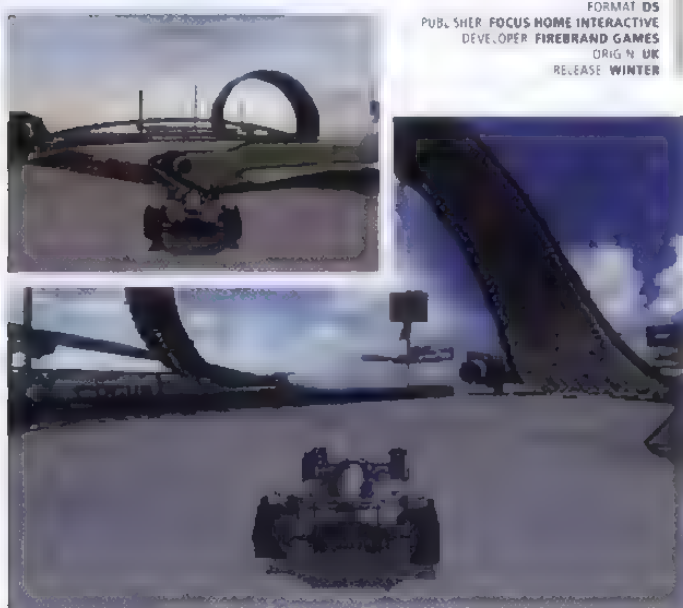
With the exception of Mario and chums, the DS has not been kind to racers. *Need For Speed* ground its gears and even the mighty *Burnout* experienced engine trouble. But *TrackMania* may be the game to break the jinx – after all, it's about building courses as much as driving them, and the touchscreen should provide a smart way of putting things together.

The track editor interface has been completely redesigned," explains project manager **Bryan McPhail** of developer Firebrand. "Players can drag and drop roads, boosters and loop-the-loops, as well as being able to quickly sketch a track layout by drawing directly on the screen."

If you're wincing at the thought of PC physics squashed on to a handheld in a game that involves so many jumps and drops, take solace from the fact that the developers have been

pleasantly surprised by what the DS can handle. "It's more capable than some people give it credit for," enthuses McPhail. "We run a full 3D physics model. It's obviously not as rich as the PC version, but we feel the distinctive handling of each of the three car types will show through."

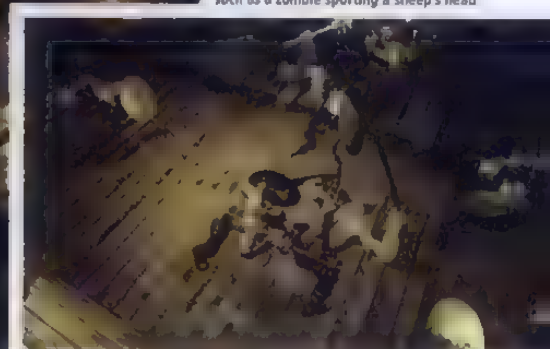
Firebrand's working on new DS-specific modes and challenges, but the control scheme, where many a rival title hits the tyre wall, has yet to be announced. Despite that, and although the graphical finesse has inevitably diminished, the series' sunny clarity seems to have survived intact. Firebrand is adamant that, platform aside, this is *TrackMania* as we a ready know it.



TrackMania DS will support wireless multiplayer and a 'Hotseat' mode for up to eight players to compete on a single DS. 'Sharing' and 'creating' loom large in the game's publicity, but nothing solid has been seen



The enemies won't all be goblins, of course, with various traditional nasties given a makeover. New ones include the 'Death Set', enemies cobbled together from old corpses – such as a zombie sporting a sheep's head.



Dungeon Hero

Firefly Studios brings a touch of Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen to your underground lair

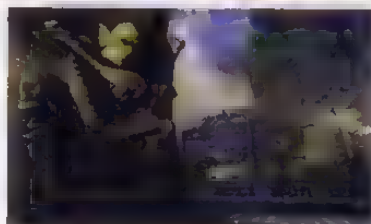
This may be called *Dungeon Hero* "but it could more accurately be called *Dungeon Psychopath*," begins Firefly's lead designer **Simon Bradbury**. "After all, anyone who goes into a cold dungeon with a sword to kill things has something wrong." That makes complete sense, of course, and is *Dungeon Hero* all over: applying logic to the ludicrous.

There are two main aspects to this: the setting, and the inhabitants. The setting shown was a network of trenches, slightly behind the front-lines of an ongoing goblin battle – part of extrapolating what a dungeon would realistically need to operate. The hero begins walking through a hospital, full of screams and silent casualties pulled back from the front. One poor soul, having his leg amputated with a saw, while further down the hall a morgue is full of corpses, the air around them fat with flies. Moving through the brightly illuminated wooden

trenches, an oblivious goblin gobbles in the corner, while others sit at a table quietly drinking soup, reading or idly strumming away at a guitar. Blacksmiths potter back and forth between forges and benches. This isn't a corridor – it's a place where goblins, eat, sleep, live and die.

Those goblins are the real stars – it's for nothing else than the reappraisal the game brings. "Goblins are poor and they make crap weapons," says Bradbury. "When you kill them you don't get a little bag of gold and an item. You wouldn't want their armour – it barely protects them." The hero simply doesn't need anything the goblins have, and the gulf between them is obvious – most of all during combat.

Even at this early stage the fighting has real meat to it, and most importantly emphasises the fact that you are a six-foot-plus bruiser against goblins that barely reach your waist. Holding a block button makes



Dungeon Hero is currently only officially confirmed for 360 and PC, but enquiries about a PS3 version were non-confirmed in what seemed like a confirmatory manner.

your character brace in position, from which he can lash out in any direction to hold off enemies – although it wasn't in evidence, this is a move that's obviously been designed for facing hordes. There's a squeaky sound on thwacking something that isn't wholly pleasant, and if you manage to knock their weapon away most simply run in fear. The goblins were occasionally a little slow to attack unprompted, but this was a very early build of a game we won't see until next year.

Dungeon Hero has a rare charm, and perhaps it comes from the fact that, as well as playing it for laughs, every character literally has their own place in this environment – the goblins and other monsters don't just morph from thin air. Firefly has always been good at finding humorous little places, but even if only the combat fails to live up to potential *Dungeon Hero* will be something new – and that has the chance, on these early showings, to be much more.



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: GAMECOCK
DEVELOPER: FIREFLY STUDIOS
ORIGIN: UK



Dungeon Hero has a huge amount of visual character in-game even at this early stage, but as well as that its story progression is done through some beautifully drawn comic artwork. They outline the story by quickly flicking through action panels, with '60s Batman sound effects accompanying actions, and there's a definite comparison with Frank Miller's work on *Sin City* – not least in the monochrome tones and casual segues into brutal violence. This will be the primary method for building up the game's backstory, and several short standalone sequences will be released on YouTube and the like before the game itself launches.



There was a glimpse of an enormous skill tree with dizzying numbers of individual paths for the hero to follow, as well as some magic spells.



Legendary rejects a recharging shield for a potentially more problematic system, where health is collected from the bodies of dead enemies. While it may enforce careful planning, it's just as likely to create painful bottlenecks

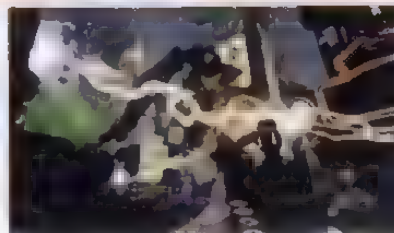


Legendary

As with all reinterpretations, this one could be hit and myth

Bad news: Charles Deckard, gentleman thief, has opened Pandora's Box. The real one, which turns out to have been quietly on display in the New York Met all these years. The consequences? An eruption of mythical animals flowing through Manhattan, and reducing the world to a crumbling September 11-influenced waste-land.

If the alternate history of *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty* saw developer Spark Unlimited take its first steps towards something other than bloody-minded realism, *Legendary* sees it running full pelt at fantasy. But the company is determined to tackle the mythical



The Golem seems likely to be one of *Legendary's* most interesting monsters, forming from the rubble of New York, and capable of ploughing a path through chunks of scenery

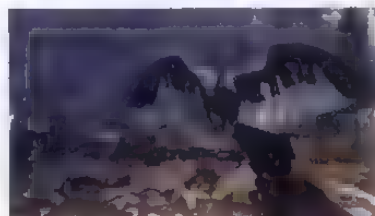
subject matter in as believable a manner as possible. That's why *Legendary's* beasts are powered by animal logic rather than magic attacks: werewolves are urban predators, minotaurs snort and charge like raging bulls, and griffons flock the skies before swooping in on their prey eagle style. Behind the direct-to-video intrigue, the real focus here is on the emergent possibilities of three-way combat as Deckard fights both monster and man in the form of an underground army called the Black Order, playing one group against the other whenever possible.

Legendary's animal apocalypse unfolds in New York, London and, somewhat incongruously, Durham, a move suggesting the canny developers may be holding the likes of Corby and Basinstoke in reserve for

a sequel. Until that date arrives, the hands-on demo gave us a chance to see some of the Durham section in action, although the art direction is more suggestive of Hogwarts following a guest lecture by Marcus Fenix, with dreamy fairytale spires rising into dull grey smoke, and close-quarters werewolf combat on improbable cobbled streets.

And here's some good news: sinewy and fast-moving, the werewolves are thrilling to fight, scaling walls and clawing their way across ceilings. Next in line, the Minotaur shows equal promise, sprung on the player in a cramped courtyard. Taking cues from *Gears Of War's* Berserker battle, it may be more bullet sponge than intellectual equal, but the huge beast creates a genuine animal intensity as it charges through cover, taking out walls and sending soldiers flying.

The promised three-way strategy is currently rather forced, however. The demo relies on a contrived set-piece with a werewolf that can either remain safely caged or be released in the hope it will attack enemy troops. Moments like this make it clear that the game will live or die by its AI's ability to create interesting, unscripted set-pieces. With a late summer release, there's plenty of potential on display, but in the morass of shooters littering the current console generation, it remains to be seen whether *Legendary* can carve out much of a name for itself.



The sight of a griffon swooping out of the sky and picking up an NYPD squad car is an early thrill. Whether such moments will only take the form of heavily scripted encounters remains to be seen



FORMAT 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER ATARI GAMECOCK
DEVELOPER SPARK UNLIMITED
ORGN US
RELEASE SUMMER

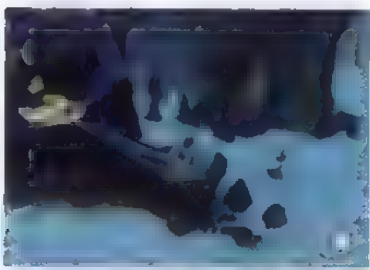


As *Legendary's* singleplayer campaign is all about the beasts, Spark is wisely keeping the same focus for the – as yet unseen – multiplayer options. Taking a cue from *Turok*, werewolves and griffons, though unplayable, will roam through the deathmatch maps, providing the same wildcard element that they do in the main campaign. An intriguing Safari mode, in which two human teams try to bag the most game before the clock runs down, also has potential. As with the rest of *Legendary*, however, so much depends upon the AI.

Monster Lab

Minigames are grafted on to a body of turn-based combat – can this creation rise to be more than the sum of its parts?

With a tone pitched at the cheerfully macabre, *Monster Lab* is a small but colourfully realised game that makes expressive use of the Wii and DS controls, furnishing what is otherwise a light RPG with a smattering of minigames. Joining forces with the Mad Science Alliance – a charmingly grotesque trio who could have played a bit part in any number of Tim Burton movies – your mission is to defeat renegade inventor Baron von Marty, constructing a number of



The art-style works well enough within the Wii's limitations. The DS' painted backdrops perhaps work better – the angular crooks of the landscape look more like an aesthetic choice rather than a low polygon count

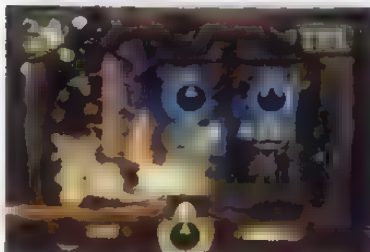
monsters to battle his minions. To facilitate your Frankensteinian aspirations, you retrieve ingredients from around the world or salvage them from the bodies of your enemies. Ingredients are then mixed to create mechanical, biological or alchemical appendages, which are then fused to your monster's body, each offering two moves of varying attack and defence value and targeting different areas of your opponent.

The salvaging and mixing of ingredients and the attachment of the resulting components all feature brief minigames – involving the usual trifling of Nunchuk and Remote. In the case of the DS, both stylus and microphone are put to use. Combat, by contrast, avoids motion sensitivity, instead favouring a traditional turn-based selection of attacks. Neither the minigames nor the combat look to be revolutionary – and probably better or deeper examples of each already exist elsewhere – but their impermanent or solid, and surprisingly refreshing, in the way that a bit of frantic fiddling offsets static strategising.

There remain a few reservations regarding

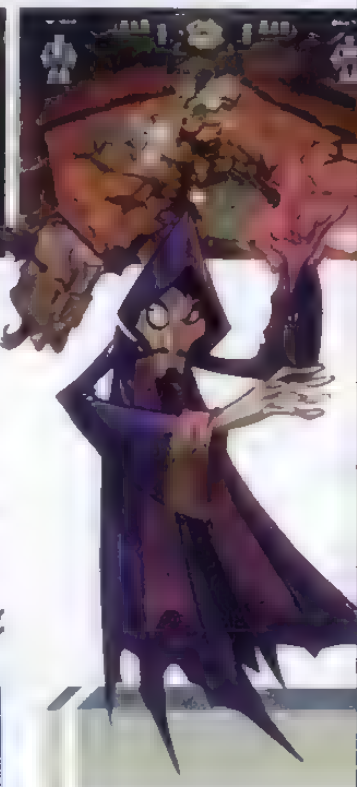


According to the developers' estimates, and they should know, there are enough components in the game to offer around 100 million different combinations – presumably ensuring a sense of ownership of your monster when you take it online to do battle with other players' creations



There's some balancing to be done, as some minigames are a cinch while others are too difficult. And it's not always clear which factors affect the level of challenge

the way this ties into a larger game – we've yet to see the full extent of the role-playing element and the early environments offered little in the way of exploration, movement was limited to a network of tracks. As a game focusing on the creation, upgrading and battling of your monsters, *Monster Lab* looks to be diverting enough, but the question remains: without the freedom and depth of world offered by competing titles like *Pokemon*, will it be able to maintain its appeal?



FORMAT DS
PUBLISHER EIDOS
DEVELOPER MCKENSLLEEP
ORIGIN FRANCE
RELEASE SPRING

Soul Bubbles

Developer Mekensleep huffs and it puffs and it blows away the cobwebs with this charming puzzle-platformer

Soul Bubbles opens with a disclaimer: the game doesn't feature any licensed racing cars, post-apocalyptic soldiers, elves, orcs or magicians. Even gang fights are right out. But don't panic, it says, everything will be hunky-dory. This would seem to be an accurate claim. In fact, what we've played of *Soul Bubbles* is so laid-back so benign as to be almost therapeutic – a battle against the over-familiar genre rehashes that Mekensleep derides.

Although the luscious and painterly art-style immediately sets it apart, the game's closest comparison is to *LocoRoco*, tasking you with chaperoning a number of tiny fragile souls through various hostile environments. The souls perish if exposed to the elements for more than a matter of moments and must be enclosed in a bubble of air which is itself under threat of being popped by the flora and fauna. Your avatar whips immediately to wherever you place the stylus and dragging away from that point elicits a large gust of breath that propels the bubble, and its souls, through and around the world's numerous hazards.

Initially it seems that there's not much more to the game than evading enemies and huffing and puffing your way around an obstacle course – but this interaction, which is fundamentally pleasing, is scattered with puzzles and diversions that increase interest. Fresh need to be put out by transporting water in bubbles, or explosives manoeuvred to destroy blockades. Certain enemies must be defeated or their sticky appendages cut with a swipe of the stylus. Collectable items are required to unlock later levels, and many are hidden off the obvious path, adding an exploratory twist to the otherwise mostly linear structure.

Simple though it may be in concept, *Soul Bubbles* has a compulsive quality to it – no doubt exacerbated by its gorgeous aesthetic design and beautiful ambient soundtrack. The later levels continue to engage the player ramping up the challenge with a greater variety of puzzles, then Mekensleep may well have hit upon the DS's very own answer to *LocoRoco* – full of quirky beauty, childlike wonder and not a gang fight to be seen.



You have three tools at your disposal: the bird mask lets you draw new bubbles, trapping objects; the elephant mask sucks bubbles; and the tiger mask divides or combines them. Often, wind, water and rock will buffet your bubble in the wrong direction, or push it into hazards; and you can only struggle against the tide so long as your lungs contain air

FORMAT DS
PUBLISHER EIDOS
DEVELOPER MCKENSLLEEP
ORIGIN FRANCE
RELEASE SPRING



FORMAT 360, PC
 PUBLISHER GAMECOCK
 DEVELOPER [unreadable]
 ORIGIN GERMANY
 RELEASE AUTUMN



Although the game is primarily focused on stealth, our preview showing featured some thumping weapons, so those who just want to run around with a shotgun are catered for



FORMAT PC
 PUBLISHER SEGA
 DEVELOPER SEGA
 ORIGIN JAPAN
 RELEASE TBA

Sonic et al perform routines marking successful – and not so successful – holes in their own special idioms, such as Sonic's breakdance. On release, *Splash! Golf* will feature just two courses, one inspired by Sonic and featuring a soundtrack including music from *Sonic Heroes*

Velvet Assassin

The game formerly known as *Sabotage* gets a makeover and a new name, but keeps the same old stealth action

Velvet Assassin is, if nothing else, at least a fresh perspective on World War II. Told from the hospital bed of a dying British secret agent in occupied France, the game has an 'inspired by' relationship with the life of Violette Szabo – a posthumous recipient of the George Cross. The game doesn't mirror her life – but uses several historical jumping-off points to set up its flights of fancy – as well as an excuse for meticulously authentic environments.

The stealth component is also heavily inspired by Repay's work on *Hitman: Blood Money*, seen in the relatively standard shadow gauge and distractions for guards. Anything but standard, however, is the outstanding lighting, which makes a gradual creep around obvious enemies a quiet thrill. As for the rest, everything is present and correct: brutal stealth kills, alarms and some effective weaponry.

The game's most interesting innovation is applying bullet time. If a nasty situation crops up, you can take a shot of morphine (the narrative is told through flashbacks from hospital). This floods otherwise gloomy

environments with light, rose petals fall, and the protagonist appears in her (revealing) hospital gown – most importantly, it slows the action to a crawl. The amount taken can also have detrimental, hallucinogenic, effects.

The clincher for *Velvet Assassin* will be its atmosphere. If it's superficial, the game will only be a perfectly decent stealth game. But if it can maintain the hints of fraught menace around the environments and missions that early showings suggest, then its more basic genre mechanics will be forgotten in the mix. We're quietly confident it will err on the side of the latter.



Those Nazis love underground bunkers, don't they? No time to admire the decor though, this chap needs killing

Sega Splash! Golf

Presumably, that's the sound of your ball landing in the lake

Of late Sega has seemed relentless in its exploitation – or, we mean, employment – of its roster of beloved characters. Joining *Mario And Sonic At The Olympic Games* and *Sega Superstars Tennis* is *Sega Splash! Golf*, a new free-to-play on-line golf game that's currently under beta testing.

Here, however, Sega's heritage will mostly appear in the form of caddies, such as Ula, Sonic and Tai, rather than as playable characters. With the game's financial mode, based around players paying for special items, such as clothes and other more decorative accessories, the anime-styled human avatars are extensively customisable. The game is built around a town map through which a shop can be accessed as well as a player room where performance statistics are displayed and avatar appearance can be edited. Additionally, an arcade centre in the town mall features various minigames that can be played up to five times a day.

It's clear that Sega is looking to tap into some of the broad success of Sony's

Minna No Golf series with a simple interface and ice-shaded graphical style, which will also, importantly, ensure that *Splash! Golf* will run on the lower-powered PCs that make up the majority of the Japanese casual market. Adding to the simplicity is the fact that the game can be entirely played with the mouse, though using keyboard commands will add a little more depth for pros.

That depth is further developed by an RPG-style experience system somewhat similar to *Minna No Golf's* that powers up player characters across four parameters, power, spin, control and impact, by spending GP (Golf Points) earned through playing. Multiplayer options include an eight-player versus mode and a tournament mode with up to 50, and a matchmaking system that fixes up opponents with similar skill.

The result is a game with easy wide appeal in Japan, and quite possibly beyond its borders. But whether it will be released outside of Japan or, indeed, on consoles, has yet to be revealed.



Several of the original's cast will return, and as well as the expected presence of Cloud and Sephiroth, one of the first levels has a delightful cameo from Yuffie

Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core

The mighty power of emo gets ready to save the world of Midgar one more time

No matter how good *Crisis Core* is and it may be very good indeed, it's going to face heavy criticism. Being an adjunct to one of the most critically acclaimed and beloved of all games in the history of the medium – and not a side-story à la *Dirge Of Cerberus*, but a fully fledged entry in the canon that uses many of the main characters from *Final Fantasy VII* – is a thankless task. Of course, Square Enix could be forgiven for not caring, as regardless of all that it will still sell by the themed bucketload.

But *Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core* is a genuine surprise both in terms of its quality and its scope. Production values like those seen here can perhaps always be taken for granted with Square Enix games. It's

elsewhere, and at a time when gamers and critics alike are bemoaning the apparent inability of RPGs to move beyond their roots and shake up a few conventions, that *Crisis Core* may show a way to keep the baby while throwing out the bathwater.

The most obvious innovation is the combat system. After enemies pop into view, battle mode is entered, with control over Zack's movements and actions much the same as a thirdperson action game: dodging, blocking and attacking while cycling through your offensive and defensive options using the shoulder buttons. Queerly, it's neither fully realtime nor turn-based, but instead allows you to queue and cancel commands; for example, if Zack is across the screen from

an enemy he's targeting, then pressing attack will make him run across the screen and attack, rather than simply swiping at fresh air. You can break into this attack at any moment with a dodge, block, spell or item, and control of Zack's position is crucial to hitting the weak spots as well as avoiding stronger attacks.

It's a big departure for the series, despite the presence of all of the usual hit points, potions and materia, and very different from the active battle system of *Final Fantasy XII*. Of course, it does mean that your combat throughout is limited to individual fights against groups of foes – but the fluidity of the system means that hardly matters. It also leads to some very daft cutscenes where another character disappears behind a nearby bush or somesuch, so they're not around while you're attacked by some behemoth. After defeating it, they tend to emerge from a few feet away wondering why you're looking flustered.

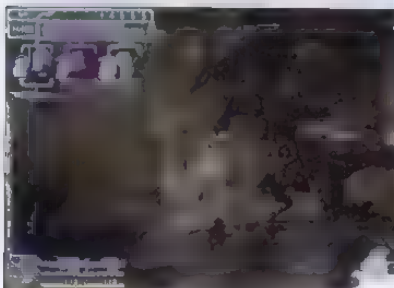
Only extended playtime with *Crisis Core* will tell whether its innovative approach to furthering the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise will be successful – and it is confident first steps are maintained throughout the game. But regardless, it has already done enough to show that, not the kind of misstep that *Dirge Of Cerberus* showed itself to be, and it should be a worthy time sink for any fan of the series.

FORMAT PSP
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN JAPAN
RELEASE OUT NOW (JAPAN, US),
SPRING (UK)



Zack has a mobile phone which he carries at all times – very handy, as one of *Crisis Core's* strengths is in allowing you to access information through it and be contacted by the other characters constantly. It hardly seems incongruous, after all, in the industrial dystopia of Midgar. Most useful, perhaps, is being able to buy items online using it, which are then delivered to you. But receiving emails and calls on a very regular basis from the supporting cast are a very important part of *Crisis Core's* atmosphere – particularly given the lack of a traditional 'party' system throughout. Being a style-conscious soul, Zack has of course plumped for a clamshell model.

Despite being a little brash, Zack actually manages to come across as very likeable. Nomura's influence is as prevalent as ever – it's disappointing when you meet Zack to see that his hair is relatively normal and does not stick out at wild angles

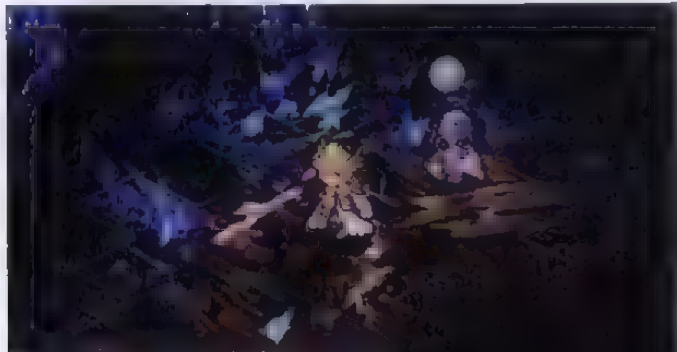


The cutscenes, needless to say, are of the highest standard and push the PSP's hardware to the limit, although perhaps in some imaginary distant-future *Final Fantasy* game bullets will start having more of an impact against big-haired kids with swords (or the enemies will become better shots).

FORMAT DS
 PUBLISHER STING
 DEVELOPER IN HOUSE
 ORIGIN JAPAN
 RELEASE 2008

Knights In The Nightmare

Sting takes giant steps onto the DS with a blend of turns and realtime



Artwork for *Knights In The Nightmare* is by Satoko Kiyoduku and Sumaho Tobe, who also worked extensively on other games in the Department of Heaven series

Sting is a small studio that's little known outside Japan. Staffed by Japanese industry veterans, the company made games like *Treasure Hunter G* for SquareSoft and *Baroque* for Dreamcast, PS2 and Wii. Working on PS2 marked the start of some difficulties—supporting higher development budgets for the company, but handhelds such as the DS have given the team a new space in which to work.

Its latest game is *Knights In The Nightmare*, a strategy RPG set in a world of the dead and the latest in Sting's Department of Heaven series of games that includes *Yggdra Union* and *Rivera*. The game's hero, named Wisp, is a soul, an entity with no corporeal form in order to battle; therefore, he must use the bodies of fallen soldiers by ending them new souls. To progress, Wisp will need to upgrade or switch bodies to improve his squad's capabilities.

The game, described as a "turn-based RTS" and a "mostly real-time" is presented in two phases. Wisp moves in turns on a stage that resembles a grid-based boardgame. Encountering enemies triggers a



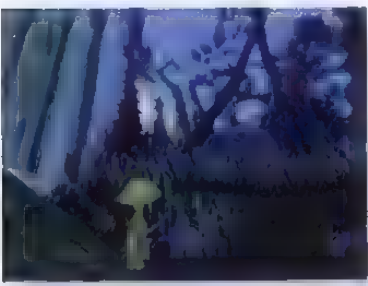
Attack and defence are performed on the touchscreen. Players must act fast to ensure they don't run out of time before the timer counts down and the battle phase ends.

slot machine on the lower screen, which alerts special attack opportunities and abilities to your forces and starts the second phase, the battle itself, which takes place in real-time. Wisp is present during battle, and is susceptible to enemy attack, making this a balance between defending and performing offensive moves until a counter ticks down and action returns to the turn-based stage.

Each skill used on the battlefield consumes some 'vitality', and if a unit runs out it's removed from play permanently. Skillful use of items, therefore, some of which some can be found during battle, will be necessary to keep forces effective.

Mushroom Men

Red Fly Studio gives us a fresh sense of perspective on fungus



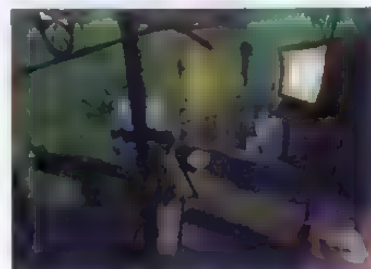
The viewpoint at one stage switched side-on to a *Super Mario Galaxy* for an 'egg jump' challenge, in which if a certain number of yucky comestibles were hurdled while moving up slopes a prize was awarded.

FORMAT DS
 PUBLISHER GAMECOCK
 DEVELOPER RED FLY STUDIO
 ORIGIN US
 RELEASE SUMMER (US), TBC (UK)

Ever wondered where all those DS styluses go? The truth is out there, apparently. Little mushrooms have been nicking them and poking spiders, rabbits and various other household nasties in the wild. It all seems so clear now.

Mushroom Men is a game based on scale, specifically three inches of fungus measured against human environments. Not only does this dictate the characterful art direction, but it also transforms some standard platforming tools: a sticky hand can be used to travel huge distances easily, and floating almost seems new again while drifting slowly down from a room's rafters. It's not once touches: creatures move to the music, elements of the levels rearrange themselves at your pointer, and different bits and bobs found can be combined to form an effective makeshift arsenal.

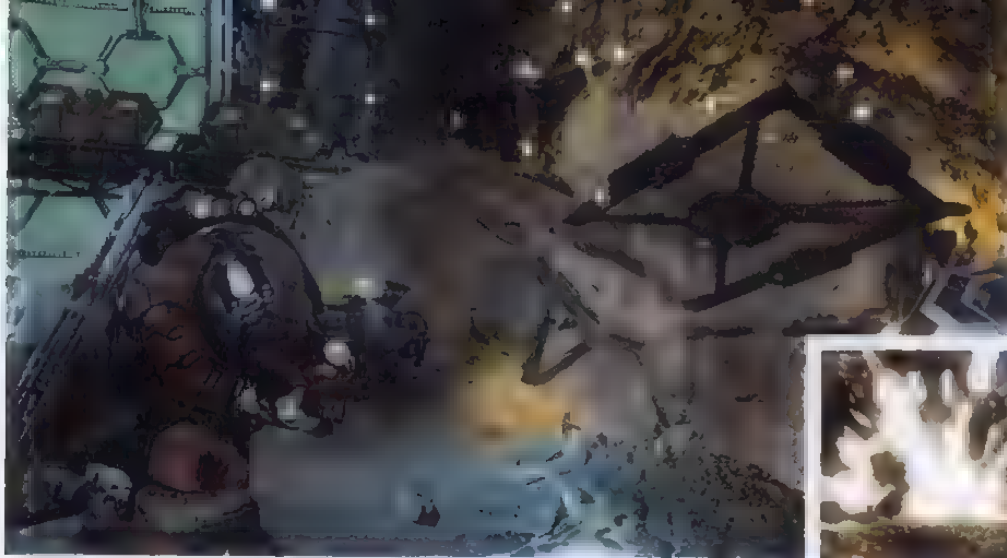
It's not all sunshine, however. The level shown was based around killing seven rabbits in pretty much identical fashion, making a heavy object fall on them. And then fighting a boss rabbit that vomits endless apple cores at you that have to be



There are some ideas that should be adopted widely in the platforming genre: for example if you die there are no checkpoints or restarts, your character simply respawns nearby. The DS version is separate, a side-scrolling platformer that's a prequel to the Wii's storyline.

knocked back to stun him before etc. etc. in the context of *Mushroom Men*'s innovative approach to other areas it's easy to imagine these platformer-by-numbers moments becoming tiresome.

But there's always a little chaff with the wheat. Hopefully this predictability in the larger structure won't be the rule throughout *Mushroom Men*, and it can maintain the level of inventiveness and innovation already seen on the smaller scale. Certainly the promised crafting system could be a welcome addition if it has a scope beyond three or four combinations. Because like its diminutive heroes suggest, it's the little things that matter.



With the number of absurdly overpowered guns you have at your disposal, we are suspect that *Fracture's* multiplayer will be more a case of wiffully submitting to mayhem than a finely balanced tactical affair



Fracture

We check back with Lucasarts to see if the earth has moved

There was always a sneaking suspicion that it's really just about the guns. Yes, *Fracture* has a promising setting – a civil war between the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of America – fuelled by the western states' exploitation of genetic manipulation – but it was clear even at first glance that the team had more fun designing ludicrous, noisy means of blowing one other up than working the flamboyant arsenal into some kind of sensible plot.

That certainly hasn't changed – there are weapons that cause giant rocky outcrops to erupt from the ground, others that burrow under the topsoil like land-based torpedoes, and another that creates a glowing maelstrom that sucks in anything or anyone unlucky enough to be in the vicinity. As for the narrative basis underlying the battle against the transhuman Pacificans, who knows whether that amounts to more than a thin sci-fi mulch, it's not really been Day 1's focus when promoting the game. Instead, the various press screenings have all hoped to demonstrate *Fracture's* gimmick of environmental deformation to the exclusion of the game's other qualities.

And it is a gimmick – in fact, the more we



Terrain deformation will be an important tactical device: bigger enemies like this chopper will easily out-gun you, forcing you to create cover by churning up the ground.

see of the game – the more concerned we get that it's a gimmick that exists only within tightly defined parameters. From the outset we had reservations about the fact that buildings were not as destructible as the and – now we realise that far from being a universally applied mechanic around which a game has been built, *Fracture's* far more a traditional shooter which allows you to dig holes in certain places. Hemmed in by non-modifiable rock-faces, gameplay occurs in a series of linearly interconnected playpens, the ground of which can be raised, within limitations, and sunk, within limitations.

No doubt this alone does add a dimension to the gunplay – the ability to

create cover or break up enemy units – and there will be a smattering of related puzzles, one level we saw required you to raise pillars of rock to support a broken walkway. But, inevitably, our heart sank a little when we realised that *Fracture* doesn't attempt the kind of comprehensive rethinking that would be necessitated by the ability to change the landscape anyhow and anywhere.

The intervening months have seen Day 1 revise *Fracture's* visuals – but the deformation effects remain a little hokey. Perhaps it's a lot to ask, but when you cause the earth to rise or fall, you might expect it to behave a little more like, well, earth – granular, full of irregular chunks. Instead, the ground swells up like a smooth, rounded boil. And it glows turquoise. Neither do the rocky outcrops you conjure tee like a part of the landscape from which they emerge – just one textured polygon passing through another.

To be fair, *Fracture* may well yet excel as a puppy blaster. Sometimes, just having a variety of concussive explosions at your disposal is enough, and *Fracture's* toolkit is so gleeefully over-the-top that it guarantees a wonderful variety of mayhem. Nonetheless, it's difficult not to feel a little let down that the early promise is not being entirely met. Ground breaker? *Fracture* may do little more than turn the turf.

Raising pillars of earth creates useful vantage points, but is otherwise sadly limited, you won't be able to use the deformation tools to escape this canyon, for example.



FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS
DEVELOPER: DAY 1
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: SUMMER
PREVIOUSLY IN: E176



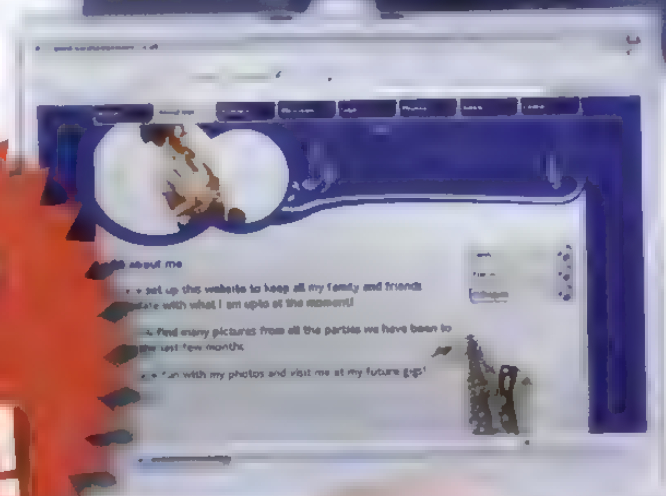
Artistic fads and shoulder pads

An art style need only be successfully employed once before it becomes the gaming equivalent of ebola. *Fracture's* recent facelift seems to be the result of a severe case of *Gears*-itis. Or perhaps that should be *Epic*-itis, since that studio's other properties have also succumbed to a glut of big booted marines whose chunky armour is studded with inexplicable glowing doodads. The protagonist, now renamed from Mason Briggs (awful) to Jet Brody (no better), appears to have hazard stripes painted on his forearms and is lit up like a Christmas tree. Good job this isn't a stealth game.

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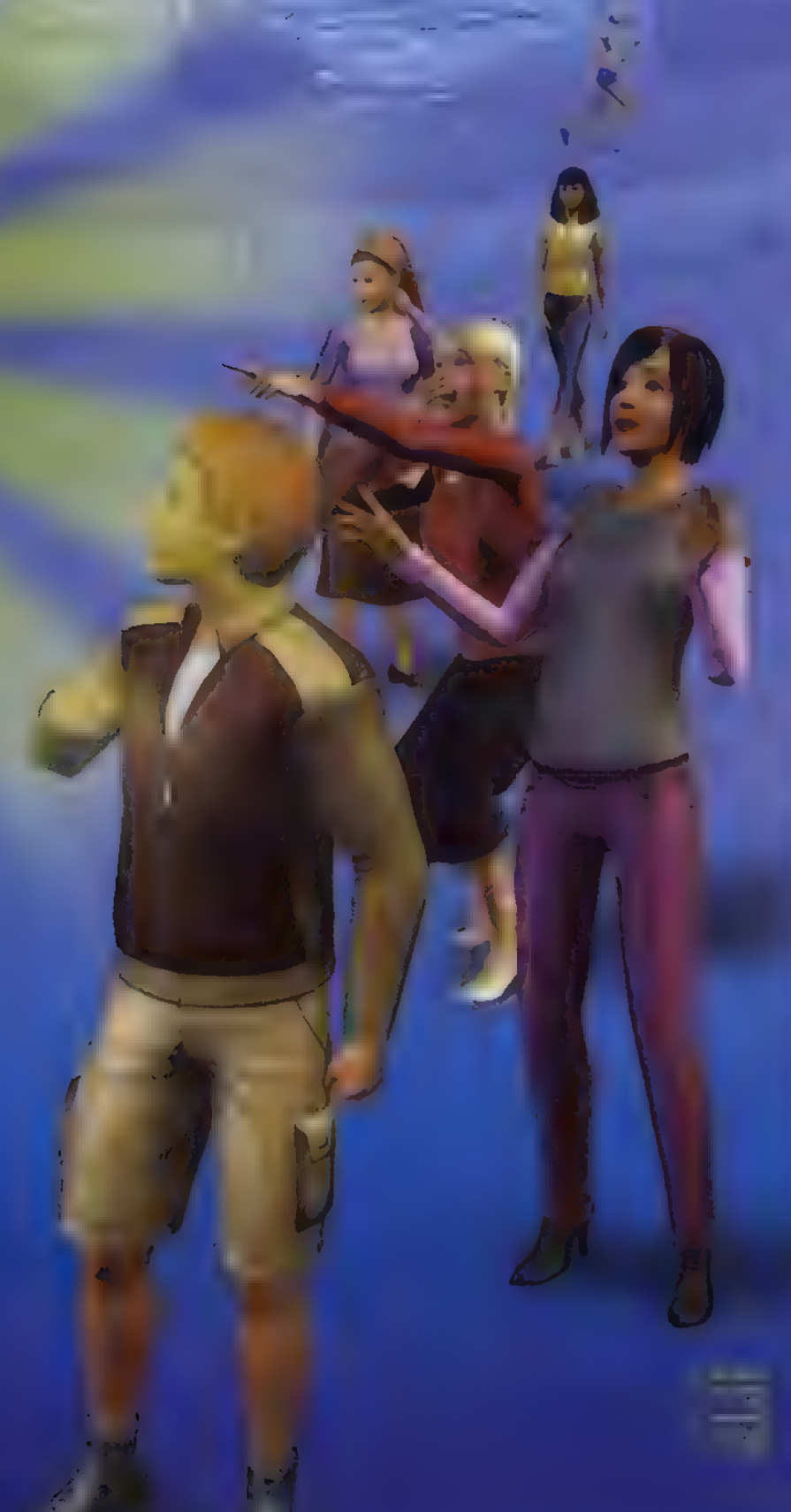
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WILL WRIGHT'S IDEA FOR A VIRTUAL DOLLS HOUSE WAS LAUGHED OUT OF THE OFFICE IN 1993. 15 YEARS AND 98 MILLION SALES LATER, EA HAS AN ENTIRE STUDIO DEDICATED TO BETTERING THE BEST SELLING FRANCHISE IN VIDEOGAME HISTORY



Social media has become a central part of our lives, and it's not just about staying connected with friends and family. It's also become a place where we can find love, or at least a potential partner. But what happens when the virtual world meets the real world? How do we navigate the complexities of online dating and social media in the context of our relationships? This is the question that the authors of "The Psychology of Social Media and Relationships" explore in their new book. They argue that social media has fundamentally changed the way we interact with each other, and that this has led to a new set of challenges for our relationships. One of the main challenges is the "paradox of choice." While social media gives us access to a vast pool of potential partners, it also makes it easier to find someone else who might be a better fit. This can lead to a sense of dissatisfaction and a constant search for "the next best thing." Another challenge is the "highlight reel" effect. Social media often shows us the best of our friends and family, which can make our own lives seem less interesting and less fulfilling. This can lead to feelings of envy and a desire to live up to the unrealistic standards set by others. The authors also discuss the impact of social media on our self-esteem and our sense of identity. They argue that the constant comparison to others can lead to a loss of self and a reliance on external validation. This can be particularly damaging in the context of relationships, where we may feel that we are not good enough for our partner. However, the authors also offer some advice on how to navigate these challenges. They suggest that we should be mindful of our social media use and that we should focus on building strong, real-world relationships. They also suggest that we should be honest with ourselves about our feelings and that we should communicate openly with our partners. In the end, the authors argue that social media is a double-edged sword. While it can be a great tool for staying connected and finding love, it can also be a source of stress and dissatisfaction. The key is to use it wisely and to remember that the most important relationships are the ones we build in the real world.

distance between real life and the world that's depicted in the game, which captures the interest of so many players.

"The Sims is relatable and relevant to everyone who plays; people see themselves in the game," says Bell. "So many of the incredible works of fiction are based on real life. It's endless in terms of the inspiration we can get out of it, it's something people never get bored of."

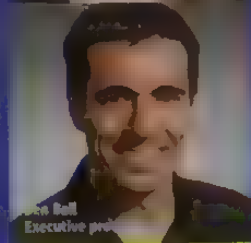
Inviting the player to identify with an avatar is a goal of many games, and maybe *The Sims*' proximity to reality makes this a much simpler step, but the God-like perspective and power of the player in *The Sims* also gives the player a unique choice. Perhaps this sounds too literary a conceit to apply to a game, but you only need to listen to *Sims* players describe their own experiences to realise that they have the power over whether they identify themselves as their Sims or as the omnipotent narrator of their Sims' lives.

"It all sort of depends on how you want to tell a story," says associate producer **Lyndsay Pearson**.

"Whether you want to be the narrator of somebody else's story, or you want to be a variety of *Sims* players, or you want to be the one who did the thing."

"We've also seen people who are really into the way that the game works, the way that the house is built, the way that the objects are placed in the house."

"I think that's the foundation of the game."



Jen Bell
Executive Producer

The Sims 3 doesn't include multiplayer – at least, not in the sense of being able to visit another player's world – but the degree of connectivity that exists between players is significant.

"The Sims is all about putting players in a position where they can share their experiences with other people. They create Sims, customise them, mod the game and experiment, and then they push their creation to the internet and other people pull it down. It's just another rhythm of multiplayer. Right now at the *Sims 2* website we have a little over four million unique visits, and to date we have had 65 million downloads of custom content from player to player. There's really a massive community that is all about sharing rather than simultaneous gameplay. And this will be more seamless in *The Sims 3* than in previous *Sims* games," says Bell.



Moodlets vary from emotional swings to temporary skill boosts. "If your Sim brushes his teeth, he will be better at kissing for a certain amount of Sims," says Pearson.

roleplaying games like *World Of Warcraft* or *Second Life*," says Bell. "In actuality, *The Sims* is a thirdperson experience, and I don't mean that in terms of the camera perspective, but that your agency, your voice in the game, is outside the diegesis, influencing what's happening. In *Second Life* you are somebody. In *The Sims* you have the choice to say either, 'I did this,' or, 'He did this,' or, 'She did this.' It can be used to learn a lot about people."

Bell and Pearson say that giving players the power to tell their own stories is the core of the *Sims* experience – and removing the barriers from that has been a major goal while designing *The Sims 3*. But just because the game has never been about challenge does not mean that it lacks depth or complexity.

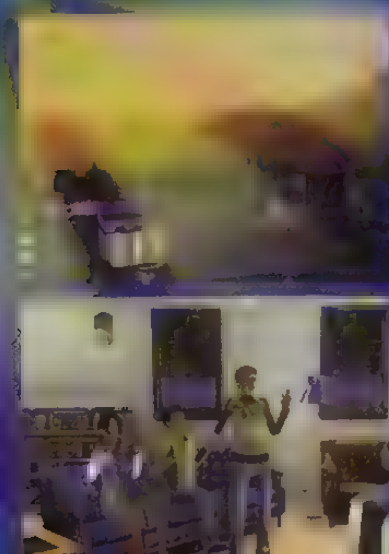
"It's amazing we attract gamers who don't think they're hardcore gamers," says Pearson. "There are so many layers, so many interesting

things to find, that it is an intense game in its own right. But the first-time experience can be very simple – we provide multiple choices of characters we've already made and pieces we've already put together to make it very easy for players. But then they can go deeper and pick the specific nose or the specific ear and start tweaking the pieces – and the same goes for the gameplay mechanics. We start at this really high level – go get a job – and that's pretty straightforward, but then you can start to strategise about how to do the job the best or most efficiently. And you sort of just discover it by accident because we give you the tools to find your own way."

This talk of strategy puts *The Sims 3* at a little distance from its predecessors, where the complexity often arose from the difficulty in simultaneously managing your Sims' basic needs. Believing that the need to babysit your Sims undermined the players' ability to execute their narrative designs, EA has pushed this aspect to the background, as Pearson explains:

"We are trying to raise your awareness and control of your Sims to a level where you are worried about developing them as characters or you're worried about their jobs and skills and always trying to better them – not having to worry about feeding them or taking them to the bathroom. That has always been an important part of *The Sims* and that element still exists, but we're de-emphasising the micromanagement aspect in favour of developing them as unique people who fit into this unique world that they live in and the part that they play in the neighbourhood; the stories you are trying to tell with them."

"YOU CAN BE THE STORY OF A KIND OF PERSON YOU'VE NOT BEEN ABLE TO BEFORE"



Bell says any intimidating depth is mitigated by having sympathetic Sims: "A lot of the complexity melts away the second they make that connection."



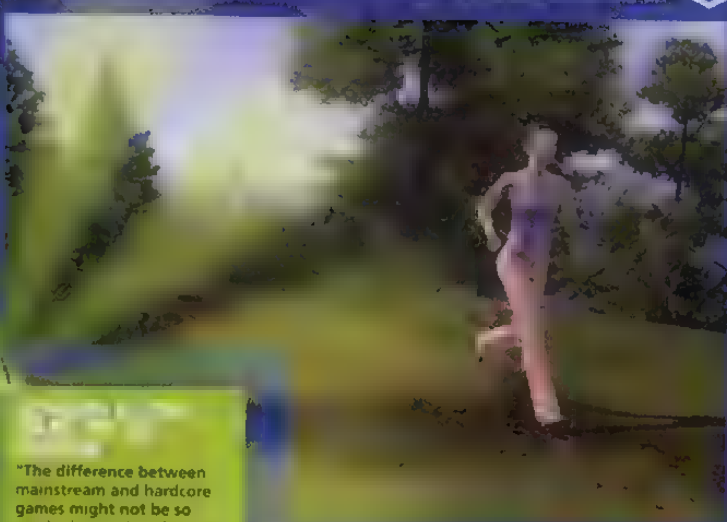
In keeping with this idea, the ease with which you can create and develop really distinct individuals has now been improved. "In *The Sims 3* you had these sliders that moved between two extremes," says Pearson. "More often than not, players fell in the middle, meaning they all had this very similar experience. With *The Sims 3* we have this modular trait system where you pick five characteristics that define your Sim. So if you pick a Sim with a virtuoso trait then he's going to have an easier time building up musical skills. Or a schmoozer will make friends more quickly. So you can say, 'OK, I'm going to make my grandpa, who is a virtuoso, sort of shy, but also kind of a party animal,' which is totally a contradiction, but you can do that. You can tell the story of a kind of person that you've not been able to before. The choices that you make for them and the gameplay you take them through is different

than for any other character you could create."

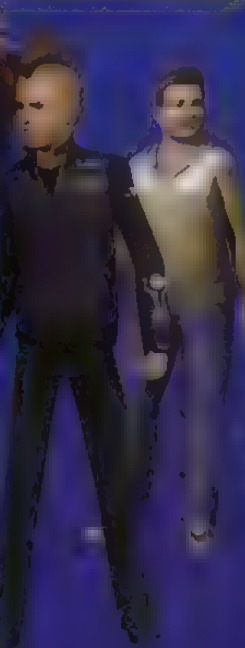
"There's also better feedback from your Sims as to what they are experiencing at any given moment, replacing the six motive bars of previous games. Now they express themselves via 'moodlets'."

"[In the game] I have this neighbour who's like this grumpy grandma," says Bell. "She is really rude to everybody and so, when she comes over, my Sims have this moodlet on them that says 'Rude Guest'. It's basically trying to explain game effects to players in a way that is really tangible and relevant to things they've experienced."

The most visible improvement that EA has brought to *The Sims 3* is its open world. It's an obvious step to take – whereas previous *Sims* games were divided into allotments, now your Sims can move seamlessly



The difference between mainstream and hardcore games might not be so much about what the games are but how they fit into people's lives," says Bell. "Mainstream games are going to be things that people can interact with on any platform at any time. We've been actually working on this with something called *The Sims Carnival*, it's a website where you can play casual games – there's an endless stream of them because they are user generated. What's interesting is that it's bringing the creators of games a lot closer to the players of games in an environment where that connection can evolve really quickly. There are hundreds of games posted on the site, and it's fascinating to watch how people gravitate from one to another. It's a great place to study what is considered 'mainstream' and what's not."



Inside and outside world

The response to this feature, Bell tells us, has been overwhelmingly positive – but the freedom to explore an open world would be meaningless without things to find. There was a risk that

no matter how mechanically superior *The Sims 3* proved to be, it would seem like a step back in terms of variety after the vast number of *Sims 2* expansions. But EA intends to match this content and, unlike before, each experience will be seamlessly integrated into a whole.

"We really are trying to add everything that existed in an expansion pack before," says Bell. "I don't think any expansion of this game will necessarily be the same as *The Sims 2* expansions. We have this open world to play with. We have the ability to layer in new content in a way that people haven't experienced before."

It's clear that *The Sims 3*, an open world god-game which places the power of narrative in the hands of the player, is not something to be dismissed as 'casual'. There is certainly nothing casual about the EA team's ambition or enthusiasm for the game, nor the series' vast and committed following. If anything, *The Sims*, and its 98 million sales, voids the distinction between a gaming hardcore and those who wouldn't consider themselves gamers at all. With *The Sims 3*, EA promises a yet more fluid and intuitive experience providing the freedom the team itself wants in order to create even better, ever more personal stories.

"We're just trying to be better at what we already do – we aren't trying to be hardcore or mainstream," says Bell – and we believe him.



SOCIAL SKILLS



We return to the studio taking Game 3.0 mainstream as two Buzzes come along at once

Don't tell Steven Spielberg, but videogames have already been making people cry for years. The places where this generally happens are called development studios. Here, along with artful exposed brickwork and home-made Katamari sculptures, you'll see grown men sobbing over impossible workloads, deadlines and not having seen their families in months. Crunch.

But at Relentless Software in Brighton this, apparently, never happens. This is the developer that claims it has killed the crunch. How? **David Amor**, the studio's director, cites simple things like removing internet access from workstations. "I think

development has got into the habit of half working and half messing around. At Relentless, we're limiting some of the things that videogame culture has become." That's why a visit to the relatively new headquarters in central Brighton ("The house that Buzz! built," according to Amor), reveals an environment a little more studious than the average codeshop. It's ten in the morning on a Thursday, and the main office is filled with the gentle background hum of productivity: nobody's Googling LOLcats or shutting down Maya to stage an impromptu water fight. It seems Relentless' crackdown on the iPod culture

of trivia has been successful: this team is serious about making games, even if the games in question are, literally, about trivia.

Relentless has been in the Buzz! business since 2005, and business is booming. The first truly successful quiz videogame is a devastating one-two punch of slick presentation and ruthless simplicity. From the Jason Donovan-voiced host to the colourful and chunky buzzer peripherals, *Buzz!* is calibrated to appeal to the widest conceivable audience: one question, four possible answers, eight million in sales and counting. Since the release of *Buzz! The Music Quiz*, there



Left to right: producer Jez Harris, senior producer Chris Field, and PS3 producer Dan Clouber

have been six follow-ups. All of them have tweaked rounds and juggled subject matter, but none have tampered with the magic formula of four friends on a couch arguing over who shot JR. Now, as we've come to the seaside to witness, the franchise is moving out of its comfort zone – into the handheld market with a PSP version, and online with the PS3.

The last time we visited Relentless (E153), with the original *Buzz!* in development, Amor admitted that his initial thoughts had been "We'll do this on the side, but then we'll get back to making real videogames." And the wider industry seemed to share his feelings about *Buzz!*'s credibility – and maybe still does. "I did a talk at GDC this year," explains Amor. "I was playing poker with some of the faculty, and they said 'Oh, yeah, I supported getting your talk into GDC. I said 'Did it need support?' And

they said 'Yeah, some people said that because you don't make real videogames you're not qualified to talk about them!'" Amor laughs. "There's still a perception in the industry that these kind of games are out there on their own. It's ironic, because they probably think *Guitar Hero* is a real game, yet *Buzz!*'s genetics are not that different."

But go into any videogame store, and you may be surprised at the amount of PS2 shelf space *Buzz!* occupies – and not just because of the oversize packaging. *Buzz!*'s quiet coup has succeeded: the game is everywhere, and Buzz himself – part Muppet, part P Y Gerbeau, is instantly recognisable to gamers and non-gamers alike. This is the game the casual

market led the charge on. This is the game people lent to their mums, and had difficulty getting back. And the 'novelty' argument, often wheeled out to belittle its phenomenal sales, doesn't explain the longevity of the appeal. In fact, *Buzz!* has a robust balance: the casual market is delighted by how much of the quiz show format it feels comfortable with, while experienced gamers are surprised by how much of a recognisable videogame it is. Amor's ambitions, meanwhile, have been pacified. "I'll never go back to making real videogames," he laughs.

Asked if Relentless is a casual games developer, Amor shifts uncomfortably, however. "Not because I don't like the term, but it means different things to different people. To a lot of people casual means Pogo, and *Solitaire*, and I see a difference between that and us – we're not snobbish about it, those games are great, but it's not what we do." *Buzz!* instead, is a social game: its design

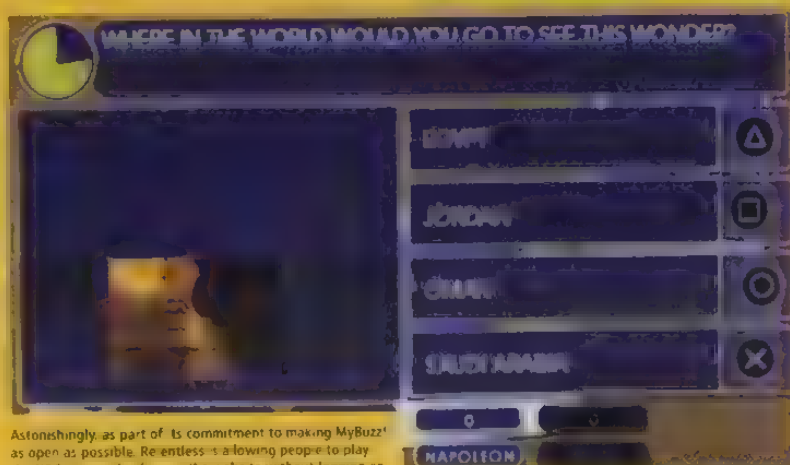
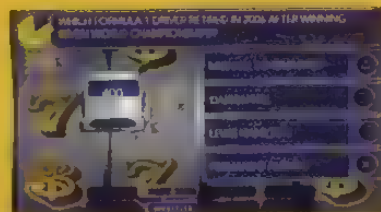
revolves around creating a reaction outside of the television – on the sofa, arguing over answers, heckling opponents, getting to the buzzer first. And that's exactly why the PSP and PS3 could be such risky platforms.

The PSP poses the most obvious threat: how can a social game survive on a handheld? Happily, actually sitting down with *Buzz! Master Quiz*, developed by Relentless in conjunction with Curve Studios, does a lot to answer that question. Developing it purely for PSP means that for the first time, the *Buzz!* team has had to focus on a solid singleplayer mode. Producer Jez Harris admits that, although a previous instalment has included it, it's never been a priority until now. "We played *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* on PSP for research," he explains. "It wasn't great, but it did work." Armed with the knowledge that the genre could at least function on Sony's handheld, Relentless now had to return to the basics of *Buzz!* and work out what made it tick.

The results appear to be a *Buzz!* that's far more videogame-like than any before it. "We had to scrap most of the existing rounds and come up with new ones," says Harris. Instead, the new singleplayer mode features 15 challenges to play through, none lasting longer than four minutes. Though answering questions is still the main staple, the focus has shifted somewhat. Some of the most noticeable changes are three ranks of medals awarded each round, and unlockable trophies. "These were in the



You can tell a lot about a game developer by the dummy reference data it puts in early builds. A quick go on the current *Buzz!* demos reveals a heavy reliance on yoga and motocross trivia – read into that what you will.



Astonishingly, as part of its commitment to making MyBuzz! as open as possible, Relentless is allowing people to play the GDC quizzes for free on the website without logging an



Relentless is heavily involved in MyBuzz, but the site is a collaboration with Sony. "We're very excited, there hasn't been a forum for people to talk about Buzz before," explains Amor.

PSP version, but we took them out because they were too gamey," laughs Harris. "But on PSP, more traditional mechanics seem to work."

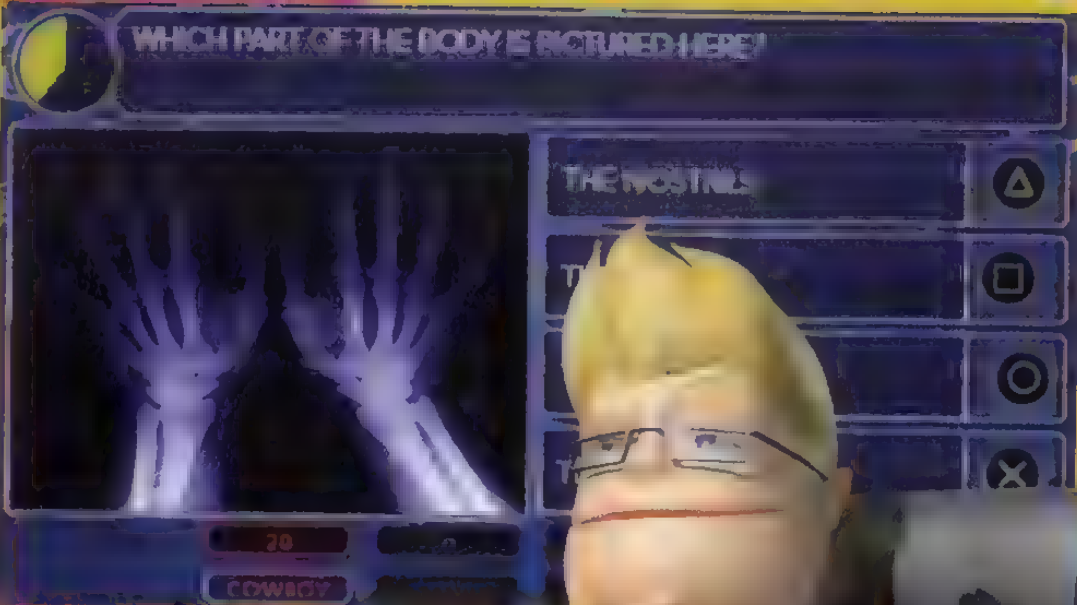
Playing through a quick round of new game-type Snapshot highlights the effort that's gone into the singleplayer game. Each correct answer reveals a larger glimpse of a concealed photograph, and gives you a chance at guessing what it is. It's a simple idea, but adds a compelling hook to competing the round in the absence of rivals. And even though there's no audience, a progress bar running along the bottom shows you how many correct answers you are away from your next medal, providing ample motivation to continue.

"BUZZ IS A SOCIAL GAME; IT REVOLVES AROUND CREATING A REACTION OUTSIDE OF THE TV"

But despite a beefed-up singleplayer, the mult player is still king, even on PSP, and Master Quiz will feature three mult player modes. Alongside the standard game-sharing, Quiz Host turns the PSP into virtual cue cards, each with a question (or dare) and allows you to make your own rules and award points. But the real jewel in the crown is Pass Around.

Harris explains that the mode came from the realization that people often played handheld games stuck around a train carriage table, or wedged into the back of a car—places where four PSPs are not often found together. Pass Around therefore sees you sharing the console between up to six players, and although the rounds are still trivia quizzes, the new twist focuses on the handover itself. Rounds like Weak Spot show you the next question coming and allow you to select the person you think is least likely to know the answer, whereas Picture This, which involves guessing a celebrity from only a small portion of a photo, allows you to choose which part of the next picture to reveal to the next player.

Relentless and Curve seem to have turned the shortcomings of the handheld platform into a genuine chance for subtle innovation. A most every new round



Buzz Master Quiz features a full dip in all of its 5,000 questions is slated for its series but something of a compression breakthrough for the PSP's UMD format.



GETTING SCHOOLED

The Schools Quiz, published by Sony but self-funded by Relentless. Taking its 5,000 questions from the Key Stage 2 curriculum, the game got more coverage in the mainstream press than most non-Manhunt games. The Daily Mail wrote a delightfully scathing article, complete with (allegedly fabricated) Jack Thompson quotes, that stopped just short of depicting a Buzz-powered dystopic future in which children are regularly uploaded with questionable data by the giant floating head of a virtual Jason Donovan. At Relentless, however, Amor has a different future in mind: "When we go across to P3, we can do things we couldn't before. It's quite a big deal to say we're going to master a new PS2 game about primary school education, but it's a different thing to say I'm going to release a

new route to market, not just for schools, but for any idea we want to try out."



The Buzz avatars have received a substantial makeover, and even the PSP versions look more charismatic.

BUZZER GRIPS

Relentless' guide to the plastic peripheral



Single Thumb

The configuration most people use when they first start to play. The thumb rests on blue, which means a yellow answer could be vital milliseconds away.



The Texter

Like mobile phone texting, this employs both thumbs to cover two buttons. It's a faster method than the Single Thumb, but still doesn't cover all the buttons.



The Saxophone

This configuration has all buttons immediately selectable and also has the advantage of being your



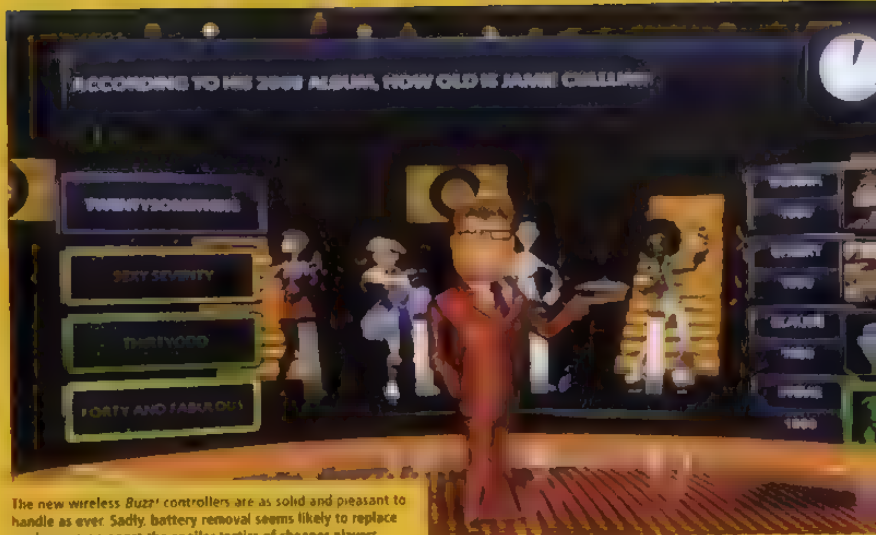
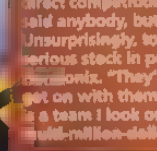
The Piano

All buttons covered, using only one hand. This negates the need to ask the brain "Which hand?" and is considered faster than the two-handed techniques.



The Barnard

Named after Buzz!'s longest standing master, who has played every day for two years. When he mastered this technique, no one could touch him.



The new wireless Buzz! controllers are as solid and pleasant to handle as ever. Sadly, battery removal seems likely to replace unplugging amongst the spoiler tactics of cheaper players

exploits new mechanics that would only work on a handheld, with the little pockets of privacy it allows. Equally, each of them opens up secrecy, strategy and the opportunity for vindictiveness

If *Master Quiz* re-engineers *Buzz!*, the PS3 version has to give it new tyres and a good waxing. *Buzz! Quiz TV* seems to be living up to that challenge. The graphics have a new gloss, and rather than the single *Buzz!* show, there are now five 'channels', ranging from sports to music, separating the questions for those who want more focused rounds

Beyond the measured evolution,

feel about going online? To the wider demographic welcomed into *Buzz!* – the parents and uncles – getting to grips with PSN logins, pings and lobbies could be a significant barrier to entry

"Playing online should be as simple as playing singleplayer," explains Amor, introducing *Sofa to Sofa*, the online multiplayer mode. "We took away the lobbies and that sort of thing that would scare people. Our game doesn't ask you questions about player matching – it just says it's going to find four people as quickly as it can. That's more important to our audience than thousands of options."

YOUR GAME DOESN'T ASK YOU ABOUT PLAYER MATCHING – IT JUST FINDS FOUR PEOPLE AS QUICKLY AS IT CAN!

however, lurks the promise and threat of online, and once again, *Buzz!* could have been in dangerous territory. While online games are social, it's not always in a way *Buzz!*'s audience might appreciate. Rather than unplugging a rival's buzzer, all too often PSN provides the stranger charms of getting fragged by an inmate from Penn State Youth Prison while they wax lyrical about your mum. And talking of mums, how will they

And it looks like it's working. *Buzz!*, in online form, still enforces social interaction, though it's co-operative rather than combative: this time around, it's you and your sofa against the world. Battling unseen opponents still affords the same kind of celebration and recrimination the game always did, and a suite of gentle innovations such as a High Stakes mode, which allows you to bet points on your chances of winning the forthcoming round will only fuel the living room chatter

Aside from online matches, Relentless is planning downloadable question packs, solving the problem of what to do with *Buzz!* once you know the 5,000 questions inside out. But the real breakthrough feature is the user-generated content (UGC), in the form of the MyBuzz! system

The MyBuzz! website will launch at the same time as the PS3 game, and provides a portal for players to create and exchange their own quizzes. Senior



Although the separate channels in *Quiz TV* allow you to play an entire game of just sports or lifestyle questions, Channel Hopper mode returns to the mix of earlier titles

SMART CASUALS

"When we started doing social games, it wasn't a well-defined genre and there weren't a lot of people doing it," says Amor when asked who Relentless sees as its direct competition. "Two years ago, I wouldn't have said anybody, but now there are a lot of people. Unsurprisingly, top of his list is another studio that put serious stock in peripherals: Rock Band developer Harmonix. "They're not a competitor, as such, because we get on with them and swap notes and things – but Harmonix is a team I look out for. I'm still waiting for the Harmonix-style multi-million-dollar buyout cheque, though."





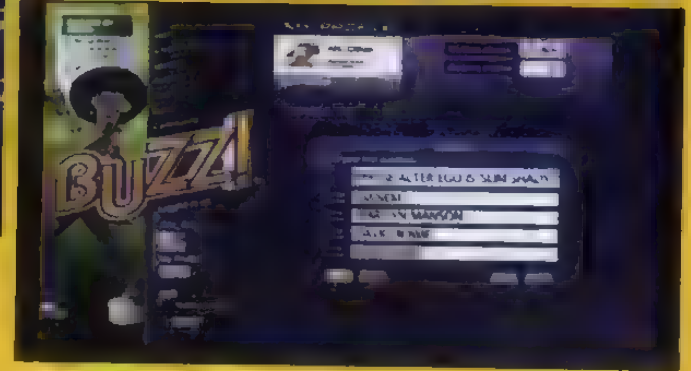
producer Caspar Field shows us around the news page as it appears on the PS3, displaying both your own and top ranked quizzes, a friends list, adverts for new question packs and your overall stats. It's a compelling platform, and as much an embodiment of the oft abused Game 3.0 concept as *LittleBigPlanet*.

Quizzes typed into MyBuzz! are then available for everyone to try either on the website itself or downloaded into the game, where they will play out in the traditional *Buzz!* manner as a Fastest Finger First round. As a demo, Field shows us a quiz about **Edge** of all things. Questions range from the editor's favourite phrase for getting drunk, to which version of *Mario Kart* is superior, and, quite apart from the fact that it's all about us, it's clear that the result of such customisation will be engagingly intimate experiences. For the first time, *Buzz!* quizzes can be highly subjective and personal. People will inevitably write questions about their cats, their new jobs, and could even propose marriage provided they can come up with three

alternate answers. The granularity of such a concept means the quizzes will no doubt cover every topic known to man outside of the minutiae of in-jokes and family life. Relentless is hoping a real competition will emerge. Using a YouTube style rating system, which is seamlessly integrated into each downloadable UGC quiz, MyBuzz! could provide a battleground for budding quizmasters, allowing them to track their work and see whose quizzes are highest ranked in the world. As well as providing a fresh stream of free content, MyBuzz! may ultimately become a game in itself.

Moderation also takes its cues from YouTube. Using a retrospective filtering model, users can get rid of an unsavoury UGC quiz within five seconds via an option on the pause menu, and the quiz will then be reviewed by moderators to make sure you aren't using underhand means to knock your quizmaster rivals down the leaderboard. "It's very brave of Sony to do retrospective filtering," says Amor. "But we didn't want to stifle the community - that's the most important thing." To prevent spamming, if you want to make a quiz you'll need to log on with PSN password, and there's also a range of parental controls and profanity filtering.

Buzz! is starting to look comfortable on both PS3 and PSP, and the franchise's importance to Sony cannot be overstated. This is a game that may be surprisingly powerful in expanding the PS3 user-base in particular, taking everything that distinguishes current consoles from their predecessors - often the same things the casual audience has trouble getting its head around - and repackaging it in a way that's easy to swallow. That should come as no surprise: it's part of a balance that Relentless tries to strike every day, evolving social games



Expect download question packs to come thick and fast following the PS3 release. A videogame quiz pack is confirmed - whether or not it will contain Field's *Edge* quiz remains to be seen.

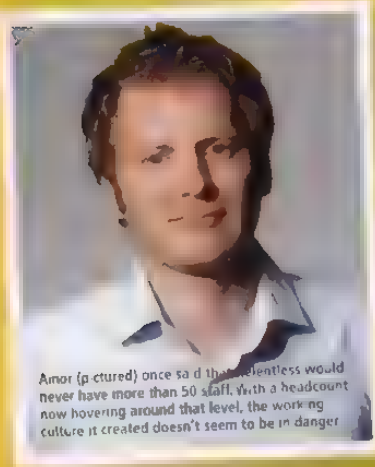
without rendering them too complex for social situations. "It's just reining in the designers, really," suggests Amor. "We think about the scenario in which games get played. We've come up with 150 different rounds for *Buzz!* now, and we have a sense of what does and doesn't work - and it's always the simplest things that work." Ultimately, Amor suggests this ability to tap the everyman market comes down to the culture that Relentless has created - the crunch-free

attitude that defines the studio. "Because we're nine to five, we do attract a very balanced set of people as game developers. These are people who drop the kids off before they come into work. I don't think we have many *WOW* players here, for example."



The presentation on PS3 is typically welcoming to people who may feel swamped by the usual menu options in games. Buzz! flicking through TV channels to select options.

And asked if he's worried that the stream of fresh content pouring into *Quiz TV* will make it hard to supersede, Amor smiles. "I've got an absolutely amazing idea for what to do with *Buzz!* next, but I can't say much about it," he replies. "One of the great things about working in social games in general is that it's not a particularly well explored area - it's not like firstperson shooters. We've only really just begun. I still think we don't do a particularly good job at reaching out to people who don't traditionally play. We're making inroads, but there are still more people who don't play those games than do. I don't think we should pat ourselves on the back yet."



Amor (pictured) once said that Relentless would never have more than 50 staff. With a headcount now hovering around that level, the working culture it created doesn't seem to be in danger.



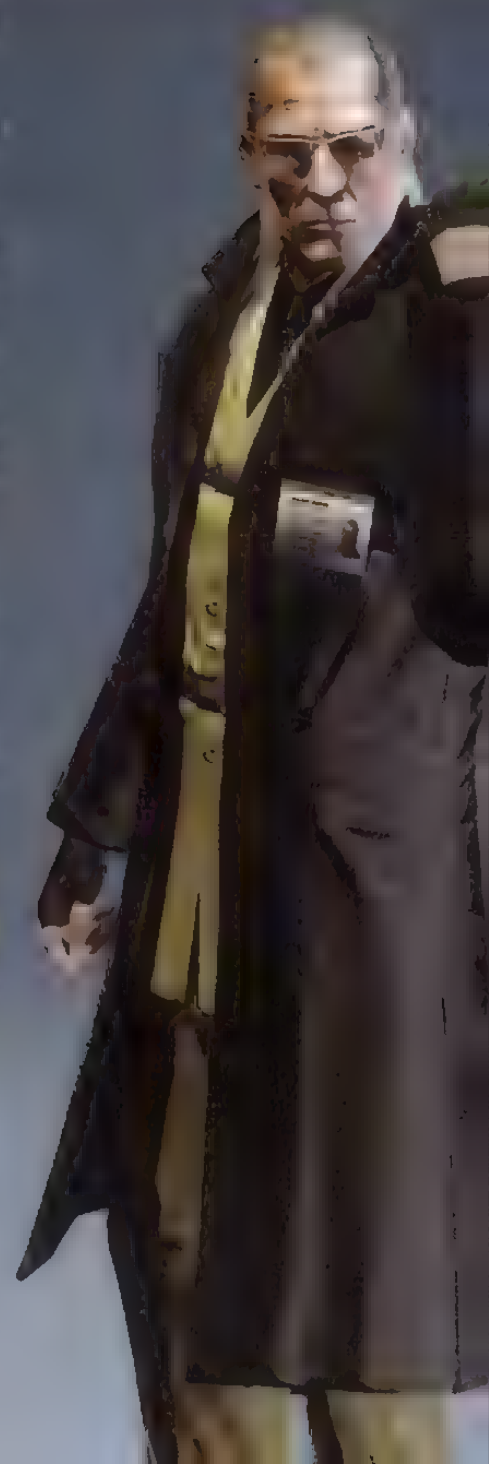
NO COUNTRY



FOR OLD MEN

IN METAL GEAR SOLID 4, SOME OF THE GREATEST OLD AND NEW GAMES TOGETHER TO BRING SOMETHING TRULY UNIQUE. BUT DO THE LAST DAYS OF SOULI SPACE BRADY SPELL THE FUTURE OF PLAYSTATION 3?

After a long and eventful journey, the Metal Gear Solid 4 team has finally reached the end of the road. The game is a masterpiece of storytelling and gameplay, and it's a shame that it's the last of its kind. The game is a masterpiece of storytelling and gameplay, and it's a shame that it's the last of its kind. The game is a masterpiece of storytelling and gameplay, and it's a shame that it's the last of its kind.



VIRTUAL RANGE

Time to clear up the uncertainty over *Metal Gear Online's* place within the *MGS4* package: it's there. Kind of. Though it is a main menu option, the version of *MGO* bundled here is a barebones installation with just a handful of characters and maps. That, we're told, will be supplemented later with downloadable content. Also accessible through the main menu is the Virtual Range, a comprehensive test facility for the game's gigantic library of weapons. Floor decals indicate the distance between you and the dummy targets, the opportunity existing to try out Snake's full range of CQC moves, carried over from *Snake Eater*.



But the more you breathe, play and are monitored over the next three days, the more you ask the obvious question: why? Why this dialogue between developer, publisher, critics and game which, with three months to go before release, is simply unheard of? Is something wrong with *MGS4*, to the extent that we've all been drafted in to a regimental "boot camp" of last-minute QA? Is Kojima worried that his fans will find the demise of Solid Snake unpalatable, or its delivery disappointing? Or is this just another mad chapter in the ongoing document of Kojima Productions, to appear on the third Blu-ray of some distant special edition? Maybe, when our time is up, we'll find out.

A rather strict NDA means there's a lot we can't tell you about *MGS4*. About its opening titles, for example, designed at not small cost by Logan, the outfit behind the iPod ads. About its story, which visits more locations and embraces more styles than any *MGS* to date. About the things it lets you play with, like a certain highly fashionable consumer gadget. About who lives and who dies. About the gun in Snake's mouth, and

his finger on the trigger. About answers which, if disclosed now, would ruin an experience four years in development but over 20 years in the making.

Instead, know that there's no sneaking off for *MGS* this time – no diversionary origin story like *Snake Eater*, and no jumble of loose ends like *Sons Of Liberty*. This

IT'S AN ATTACK OF THE CLONES, AN EPIC TREATISE ON MODERN WARFARE AND A BOUNDING OTAKU FANTASY, SEXY, OPERATIC AND THICK WITH EASTERN CHARM

fourth game, *Guns Of The Patriots*, is free!K enough to leave almost no scope for another – a bang of a finale, not a whimper. It's not, says Kojima, how he would have done things had he known before what he knows now, but that's life for a series that's already ended twice.

"When I created *MGS2*," he explains, in a room that looks like a Scandinavian Death Star, "I made it so it ended – that was the finale. And it was the same for *MGS3*, only now I had a complete saga both in story and theme. Looking back now at *Metal Gear Solid*, I probably wouldn't have introduced

who would be stronger than the previous Solid, or Snake himself? And if you want to beat Snake, it's really hard to be a clone of something, and that's quite an old concept.

"I like in *Ultimate*, the ultimate boss will be a clone of Ultimeus, stronger than Ultimeus. And in *Spider-Man*, the ultimate enemy is Venom, I'm regressing now that *MGS4* had to end that way; if I had the whole series in mind from the start, I probably wouldn't have set that theme."

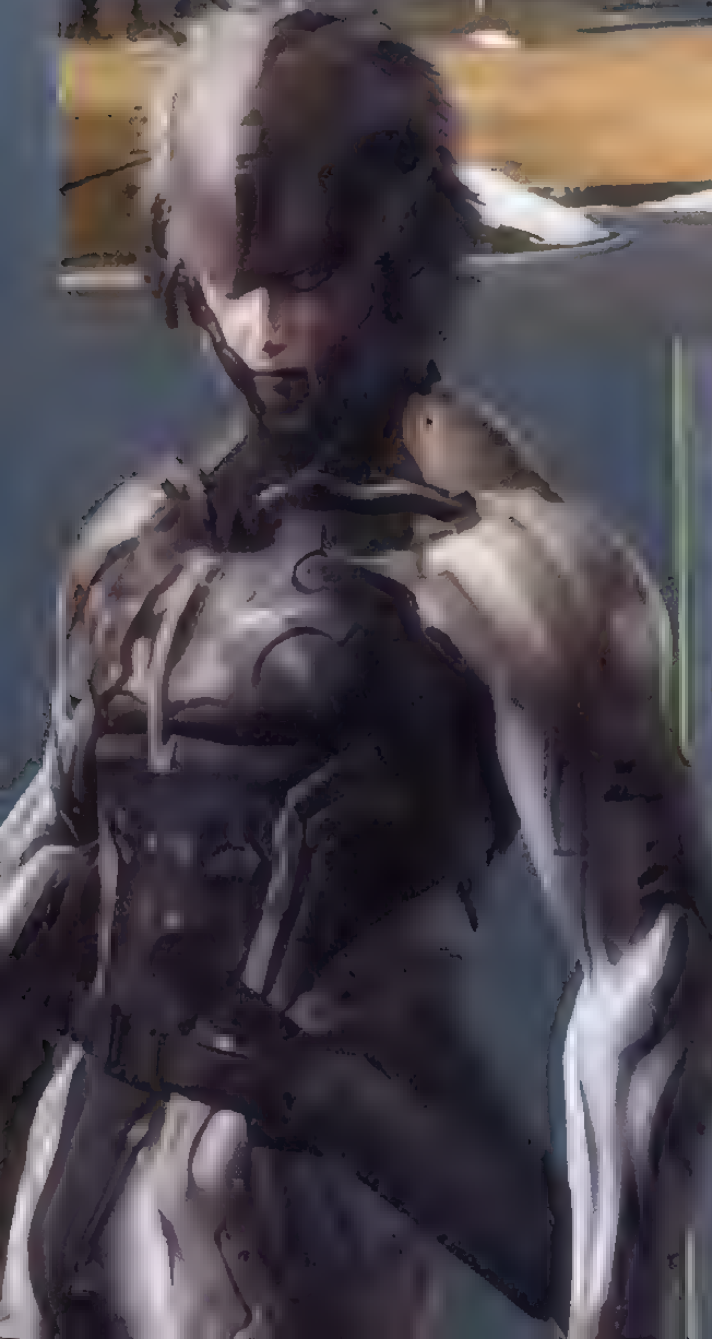
In bidding adieu to *Les Enfants Terribles*, the rival siblings Solid and Liquid Snake, *MGS4* has thus become an awful lot of everything. It's an attack of the clones, the robots, ghosts and men, an epic treatise on modern warfare and a bounding otaku fantasy, sexy, operatic and thick with eastern charm. You can glean a lot from Kojima's own advice that it's very much an *MGS2*

style affair, more concerned with saving the world than making personal discoveries. "You know the goal," he says, "and you know how to proceed. The style is totally different [from *Snake Eater*] – and I knew there'd be a like or dislike thing with that from the start."

He refers, of course, to the series' notorious cinematics, which return here longer and wordier than ever. "When creating a title for PS3, as a final chapter in the *Metal Gear* saga, I asked myself what people would expect. Now, the easy answer is an upgrade, of graphics and sound for the



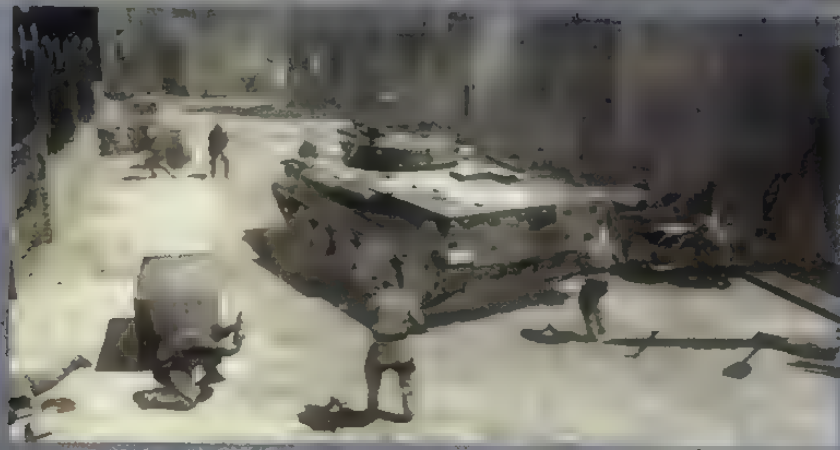
ON THE
EDGE



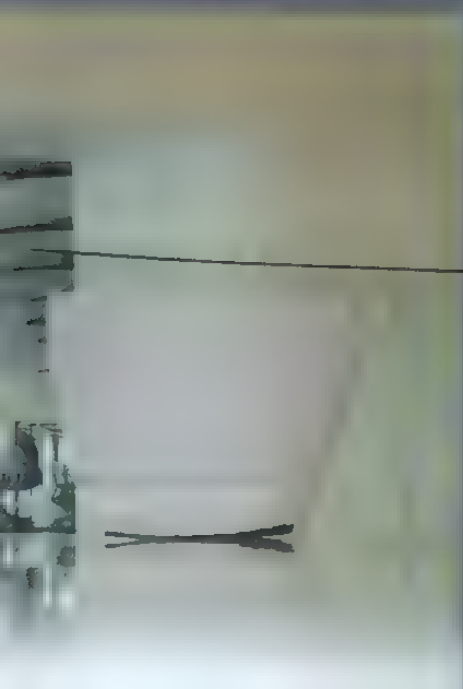
the code didn't complete, it was a
fire on rocks.

So, with little between you and the
pittle last fortune and a parked lorry, you
redecorator Snake not by instruction, but by
centarous switch. But the trigger, left
springing up the items need, right the
weapons. Then the X button, which
crouches with a tap and goes prone with a
hold. The shoulder buttons are next, left for
aim and right for fire; the triangle pushing
his body into first-person view, doubling
as a contextual action button for well-
stepping, etc. You stagger into your last
shadow, dazed by this revised, improved
system, before the distant sound of moaning
and galloping hooves roots everyone to the





THESE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST.



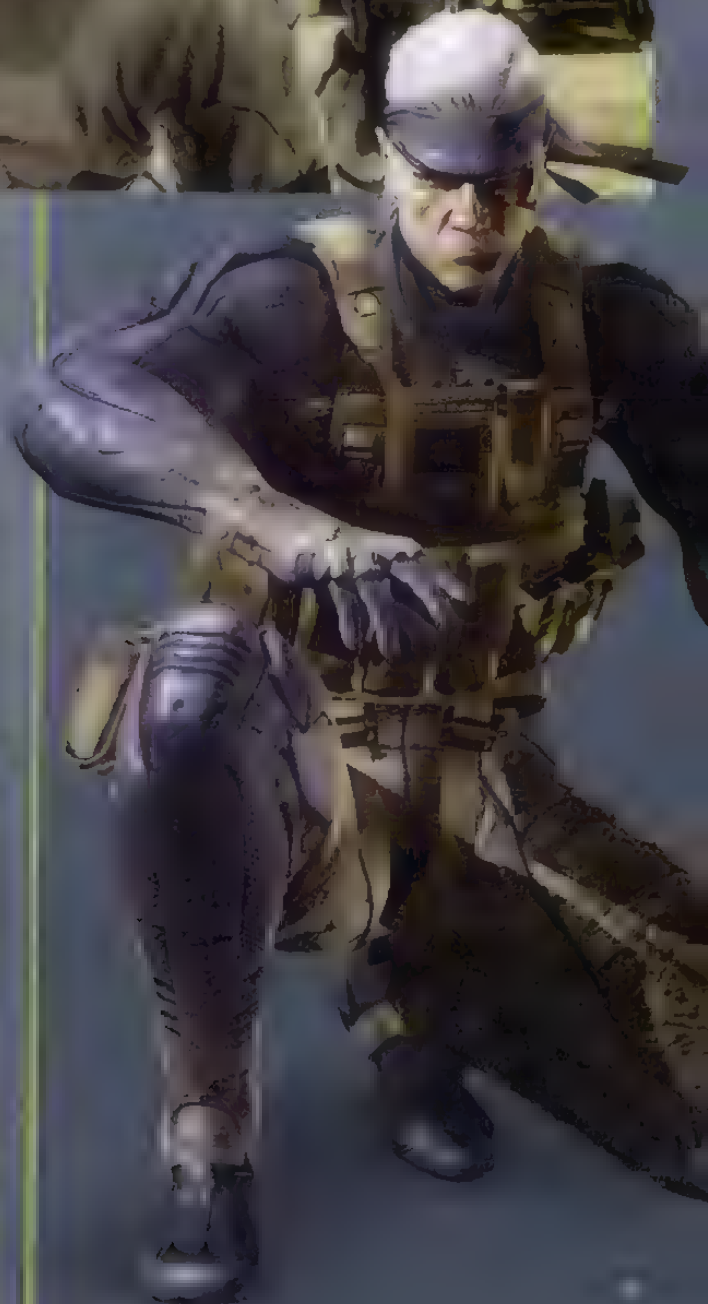


THE BATTLE OF THE BATTLEFIELD

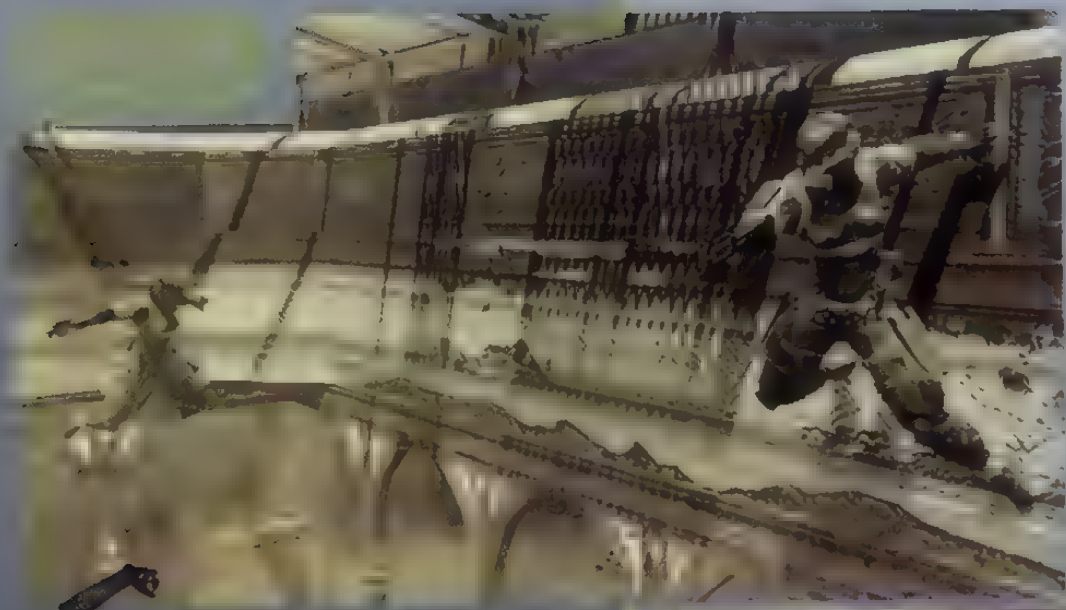


THE PLOT THICKENS

If there's one thing *MGS4*'s new mission briefings are not, it's brief. Sandwiched between acts and set mostly in Otacon's new flying fortress, they build as much character in one hit as any previous *MGS* cutscene. Snake, you discover, is so cantankerous an old man that he should apply for British citizenship forthwith, though he'd probably take issue with the smoking laws. Sunny, meanwhile, the daughter of *MGS2*'s Olga Gurlukovich, has made the place her home having lived there all her life. All of *MGS4*'s cutscenes can be paused or skipped, but the briefings go one further by letting you tour, via multiple cameras and the droid, the decks of the plane seeking out hidden items like music tracks and batteries for the Solid Eye



...the man who is the most dangerous man in the world...
...the man who is the most dangerous man in the world...
...the man who is the most dangerous man in the world...





GHOSTS IN THE SHELL

The nature of MGS4's boss fights is as much a subject of our NDA as it is something to be enjoyed without prior warning. What we can tell you, though, is that several battles involve the Beauty and the Beast Unit, a foursome of armour-clad female warriors with various kinds of post-traumatic stress disorder. Comprising Screaming Mantis, Raging Raven, Laughing Octopus and Crying Wolf, their attributes pretty much speak for themselves, especially if you're familiar with the bosses of MGS's past. The Beauties are modeled on real-life actresses Lyndall Jarvis, Scarlett Chorvat, Mieko Rye and Yumi Kikuchi



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It's a MMOG's life

Fantasy isn't easy — we visit NCSoft Austin, with the dust from *Tabula Rasa*'s launch settling, to meet the people who maintain online worlds

NCSoft Austin is an unassuming building, smooth gray in the stark Texan sunlight with pot plants, speed bumps and smiling employees smoothing over the presence of one of the state's major highways a few hundred feet away. There are clues it's something other — the two grotesque fantasy creatures in reception, the odd bank of arcade machines outside a lift — but it's almost resolutely normal. That is until you're in the offices themselves, where the rows of screens display nothing but games and debug menus. GIMs check schedules with serious expressions, and you realise you're in the administrative hub of several massively-multiplayer online worlds.

Is it MMO, MMOG, or MMORPG? Whatever you call them, they're one of videogaming's most significant phenomena, one that has seen a few massive triumphs, a smattering of successes and plenty of also-rans. But long before *World Of Warcraft* opened the western floodgates, a 1998 game was piling up eastern subscriber numbers of over three million. The game was *Lineage*, and from that start NCSoft, founded in Korea in 1997 by Tak Jin Kim, became one of the global players in the MMOG field: the developer of *Guild Wars*, *Lineage II*, *Tabula Rasa*, and publisher of *City Of Heroes* and *City Of Villains*, all with a subscriber base of hundreds of thousands.

The most significant part of NCSoft's early expansion, to western eyes at least, was the merger with Destination Games to create NCSoft Austin. Destination Games was the company co-founded by **Starr Long** and the brothers Garriott, Richard and Robert, after all three had left EA's Origin Systems. The deal meant they got financial muscle and worldwide infrastructure, and NCSoft got the nucleus of the team that had developed the west's MMOG template, *Ultima Online* (also a huge inspiration for *Lineage*.) The new NCSoft Austin began work on 'project X' in 2001.

In late 2007, *Tabula Rasa* launched after six years in the making to widespread critical

fanfare and one or two technical problems (swiftly fixed by the odd patch release and the addition of some new features here and there). Gradually, things quietened down and everything seemed to be going smoothly. But then something strange happened. A report in the Korea Times appeared on February 18 that alleged that NCSOFT Austin had "inflicted a massive loss to the parent company by failing in a six-year blockbuster project" and that "the *Tabula Rasa* game has proven to be a financial disaster". As well as merrily predicting layoffs, which as the report circulated somehow solidified into 70 out of 300 employees, the article implied that this was somehow the result of a Korean company investing too heavily in a western developer: after all, NCSOFT Austin was "the largest foreign operation of a Korean IT company" and had employed none other than the "famous American" Richard Garriott to mastermind the project.

Like most scare-reportage it quickly died down after an initial flurry, and some stinging rebukes from NCSOFT itself. But we're at NCSOFT Austin's offices to find out why such an anticipated MMOG was the subject of such controversy. "It's an amazing thing," says Long, the producer of *Tabula Rasa*. "I liken it to sharks - there's a little bit of blood and then..." Despite Long's 'State of the Game' address to reassure TR's community, the story's quick take-up by gaming news sites provided ample fuel for the 'where there's smoke there's fire' brigade. But: "70 out of 300 isn't even close," says Long. "It's not even of that scale it's not even a tenth of that." More to the point, it was the natural end to a MMOG development cycle. "The TR team stacked up to launch the title, and although I can't talk of specific numbers I can tell you we didn't

have a team of 300. That's the typical production cycle, you staff up a bunch of people to get the product through the door, and now we're in a different part of the cycle we're scaling back. The massive layoffs just aren't reality at all." So what inspired the report? Ludicrous as it may seem, it may have simply been the fact that TR didn't immediately break the million-subscriber ceiling that NCSOFT has been unable to reach since the original *Lineage*.

TR's numbers don't suggest anything like a disaster: various sources put the subscriber base hovering in the middle of the 100,000 to 150,000 bracket. This may have been below NCSOFT's own expectations for the title, but it's also a faster take-up than the likes of *Tibia*, *Asheron's Call*, *Dungeons And Dragons Online* and *Final Fantasy XI* enjoyed (ironically enough, it's also just enough to take TR's figures over the current population of Garriott and Long's decade-old *Ultima Online*), and maps a growth curve similar to the likes of *EverQuest* and *City Of Heroes*. It's hardly

"The biggest change is that once we go live, people are paying us to play the game, and so the rules that we operate under become much more strict"

World Of Warcraft level, but it's more than respectable. "It's not as big as we wanted it to be, but it's big enough right now, and people are still buying the game and we're getting lots of retail activations every day," says Long. "What's really good is that the community feels we're responsive to them, yesterday Massively.com was asking about where the best customer service GMs are, and there was a lot of good feedback for us because we really try to be there all the time



and have a presence and fix things, and not just in our updates - when people are petitioning things that are fixable right there, we'll do it. I'm pretty happy with the game's reception.

From that start, growing a MMOG is not yet a perfected art: there has to be a balance between maintaining the core experience, fixing problems, offering new content and trying to balance the need to attract new players with the necessity of

pleasing the old ones. And as soon as a MMOG ships, its development team instantly gets thousands of different points of view on how each aspect of the game can most effectively be re-tuned. "The biggest change," says Long, "is that once we go live, people are paying us to play the game, and so the rules that we operate under become much more strict - because we want to keep our customers happy." In practical terms, this means "a lot more player input into our priorities. We sit down pretty much every day and think about what we're working on, and one of the biggest considerations is what our service calls have been about, what's been happening on the forums, what are we noticing in-game?"

The people who notice in-game are the gamemasters (GMs), a group of 20 or so employees who work on the same floor. "When it launches, you're just hoping it works," says Will Leverett, NCSOFT's game support manager. "You don't know what the world will feel like with people in it - you can build an environment, but until there's people in it you have no idea how they'll break it. They will do anything and everything to the game." The GMs sit in parallel rows that cut diagonally across a large open-plan space, each with their own specialised role. "Steven over there tests missions and knows how things should work in insane detail, it's hard to get him to

Tabula Rasa's greatest innovation was making combat more realtime. Although stats are still in the background, large-scale tear-ups with foes have a pace and pyrotechnic quality new to the MMOG





From Denmark, with love

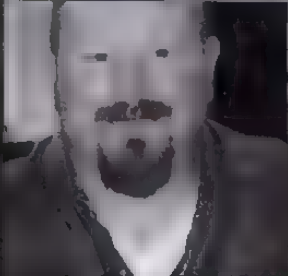
"There's always weird stuff that happens in community support," says Erskine, before leaning forward in his chair. "A lot of them, unfortunately, are X-rated..." There are the two Danish gentlemen who flew to Austin because their *Lineage* accounts were cancelled - for cheating. There's the gentleman who somehow has Will Leverett's mobile phone number and calls him every lunchtime asking if his banned account can be reinstated - he's been trying for about eight months so far.

"I don't even think that's that unusual," continues Erskine. "In the years I've been doing this we've had bomb threats, we've had to call the FBI on people, we've had all sorts - one thing that comes to my mind is that our records were recently subpoenaed for a divorce lawsuit because someone was having an affair in-game and they used our chatlogs as their substantiating factor in the divorce case and," leaning back in his chair, "we won't say what game that was for." Gives a new meaning to 'griefing', if nothing else.

look up sometimes - we call him the machine; he calls himself a slacker." continues Leverett. "Here, Jimmy's just working through a few tickets, this next guy's more familiar with Chinese IP addresses than he'd like to be, and so on." Jimmy the GM has checked the latest ticket and is now nonchalantly running through *Tabula Rasa*'s world at many times player speed, before stopping to deftly pluck a collectible. He hands it over to a player prevented from reaching it by a game error and files a notice so the problem is fixed in the next bug hunt.

Leverett's team actually covers several games; as they're pointed out, the overseers of *Guild Wars II*, *Lineage II* and *It's a Wonderful Life* say hello, while the GMs from *City Of Heroes* side give a cheery wave. In live production, NCSoft Austin supports *Lineage I and II*, *Guild Wars*, *City Of Villains*, *Dungeon Runners* and *Tabula Rasa*. "It's a weird blend of technical and social interactions we have with players," Leverett explains. "We send a daily and a weekly report to producers about what's going on with the game, the most reported problems and issues in terms of importance - basically an analysis of what we do."

The complexities in this 'weird blend' for the GMs and the game in general are issues like virtual harassment, which range from relatively minor profanity and griefing all the way to virtual rape. There's also the question of whether players have the right to input on the creative side - CCP's *Eve* will shortly have a players' committee with just such a responsibility. Developers have to set limits on their worlds, but do they feel a responsibility to see them develop in a certain way and within certain parameters? "In many ways we see our job more like the government than game designers - we have to create and maintain certain laws for the good of society," replies Long. "Things like profanity filter, 'police' or darkmasters to control harassment, 'arresting' or banning gold farmers, are all part of keeping society



...s many attractions, NCSoft Austin's support team (top) with a city machine. ...ends at 25 cents. A fizical benefit programme? Above are (from top to bottom) John Erskine, Starr Long and Will Everett.

Forum wars

One of TR's notable decisions pre-launch was that there would be no official forums, which would seem an essential part of the modern MMOG's community network. Long points out that: "The community already has their favourite sites they like to go to. And so we saw it as people having to split their time between their favourite community site and our official forums, so we thought let's just let them stay in the place they like and are used to, and we'll keep a presence there." There seems to have been no significant backlash about this quiet change, and the likes of Massively.com and Fentonhammer.com arguably provide a greater centralised community for MMOG players than any one game could hope to. Long adds that: "We wanted to focus most of our community efforts into things we could do in-game, like contests and one-offs, and we felt the time would be better spent in other areas."



In our mind there is little to no difference between maintaining this order in the virtual world and the real world," Long adds. "The line between the real and the virtual world is increasingly blurred, especially in the sense that no one is being harassed or hounded, or feeling like they're not on the same playing field as everyone else."

They're issues that can often lead to divided loyalties, from the community itself, even from the GMs. "That is a real challenge for this type of business," begins Erskine, NCSoft's director of studio operations. "Because we want our people to love the game, but not love the game. You want them to love the game, but they can be really tough." Erskine is bullish about NCSoft Austin's record and claims it has had any difficulties with GMs, citing a "great working environment" and "a lot of experience and a regular turnover of staff" as aids. "We try to make sure we get the best people," he adds. "We have logs of everything people do in the game - it'll be audited, and we do a combination of routine and random audits to check things."

But Erskine's concerns about the game environment range beyond support issues. Gold farming, levelling services and the like are some of the biggest issues for the providers of MMOGs. "Our games run the whole gamut of gold farmers, bot programs and whatever else you can think of," says Erskine. "Any time there's the potential for commerce people are very motivated, so we have to be equally motivated about protecting the integrity of the game - it's a daily thing. These are professional companies, they're very organised and are doing this to make a profit. And so to that





Some of the other titles supported by NCSoft Austin include (clockwise from below) *Dungeon Runners*, *City Of Heroes*, *Guild Wars* and *Lineage II*. *Lineage III*'s source code was stolen last year, a theft that NCSoft says could cost it \$1,000,000,000



and they'll do everything they can to produce their product, a virtual item, as cheaply as possible." Gold-farming operations are typically based in the likes of China or Mexico due to labour costs, and their workers have quotas and shift patterns: they are significant and sophisticated operations. Trying to stop their activities looks a very grey area, legally if nothing else, and a tall order indeed – if not impossible.

Unsurprisingly, Erskine demurs:

"Somebody that is trying to farm gold is actually doing really specific behaviours – repeating missions if that's possible, or making a crazy amount of money in a short period, or killing an abnormally high number of monsters compared to the average, so we build tools to identify behaviours and profiles." Looking for specific behaviours in a MMOG in this context is relatively uncontroversial, although for a view from the other side see Julian Dibbell's excellent New York Times article *The Life of the Chinese Gold Farmer*. But it's also the only way a company like NCSoft can fight back: after all, it would lose a simple battle of manpower. "There are lots of things we've done that I think are quite ingenious, I can't tell you what they are because for obvious reasons that's our competitive advantage – but for the industry as a whole this is a huge thing."

And an ongoing one that dovetails neatly with Long's preferred terminology of 'platform' to describe the MMOG in general – by making TR a platform, NCSoft can make gold farming a form of piracy. "Online really is its own platform, because of the social connection with people. I think of PCs and consoles and online: it's not a genre or a niche because you can have any kind of game within that space. You don't talk about PS3 or Wii games as a genre. Inside online you have shooters to RPGs to RTSs to puzzle games to... anything you can think of." That certainly takes account of



the MMOG's diversity (although we wonder if open-world games would, by that definition, also be a platform rather than a technology), and it's important to remember the platform is still young – only ten years old in its current form – compared to the rest of the games industry. *Tabula Rasa*'s six years in development is more than half of that time, which may help explain its oft-cited redesign partway through, since the western marketplace, primarily thanks to



mean I remember in 1994 when *Myst* came out and everyone was saying: 'if you're not like *Myst* you're screwed.' I don't really buy into that philosophy."

Put like that, not many people would. It's baffling that a game as innovative in its field as *Tabula Rasa*, that has done reasonably well commercially and promises to be a MMOG staple for years to come, should have been subject to such intense negative rumour and scrutiny so soon after launch. It

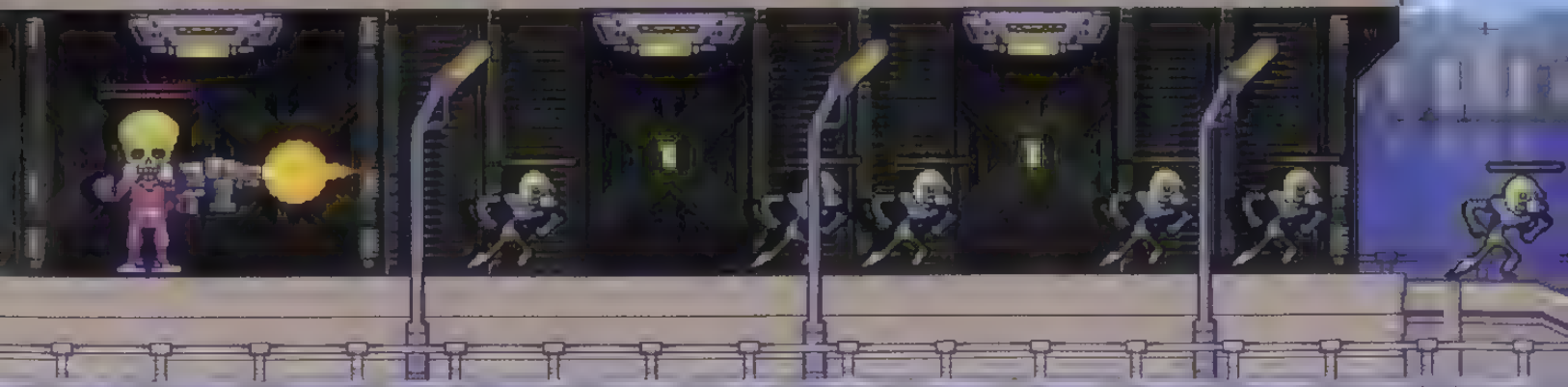
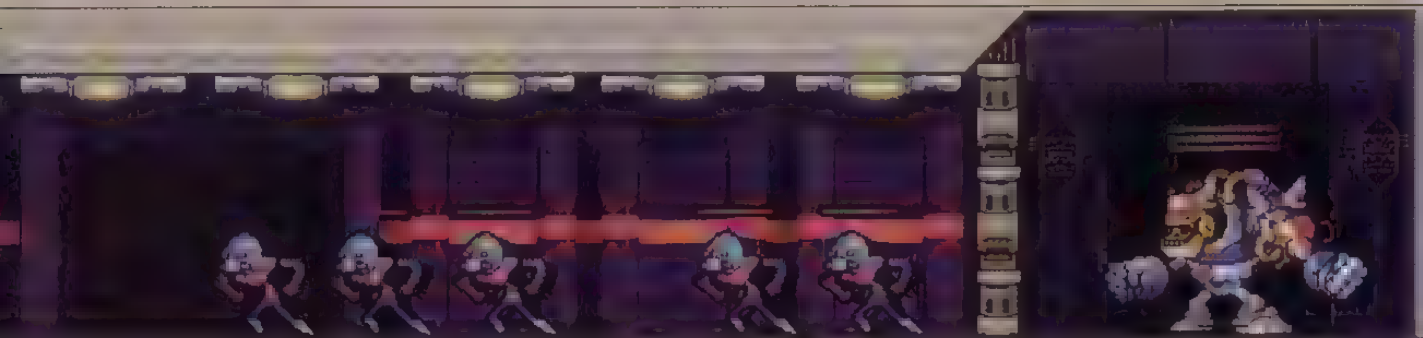
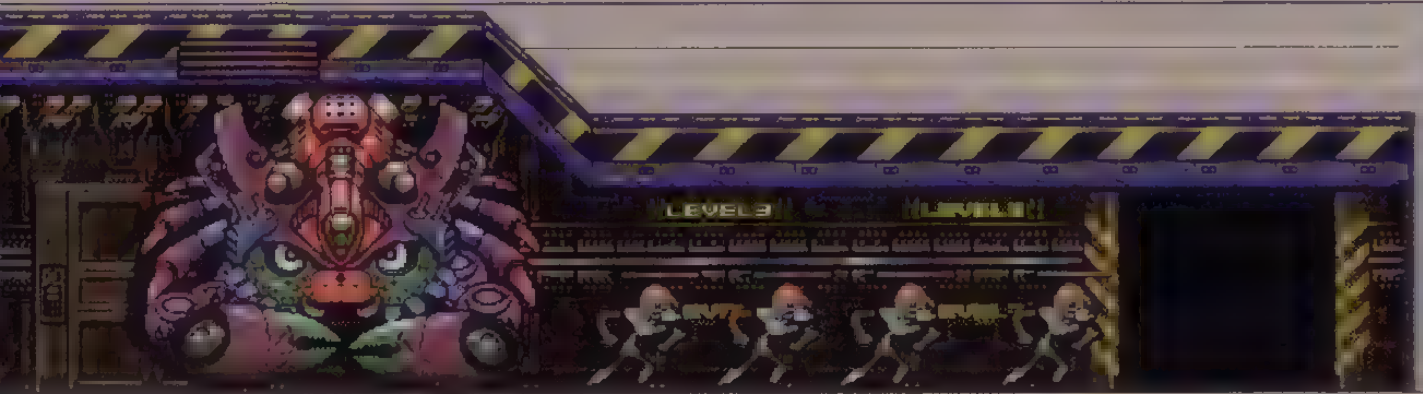
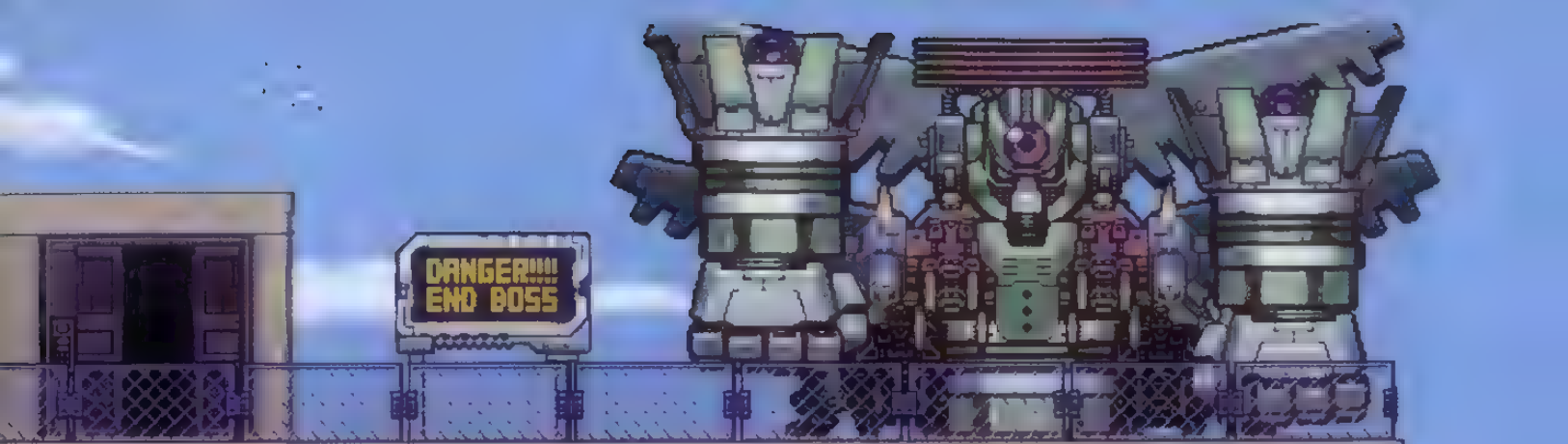
"We thought there might be a stage, this early, where you'd run out of players. And then WOW happened – and it said: 'No, you won't.'"

Blizzard, is now unrecognisable compared to that of 2001. "The scale definitely surprised us," says Long. "We were always optimistic, we always looked at the trends but at the same time we thought there might be a stage, this early, where you'd run out of players. And then *WOW* happened – and it said: 'No, you won't.'"

It's difficult to ignore *WOW* when talking about any other MMOG – both because so many developers make it their ambition to achieve something similar, and because of simple ubiquity. "I think Peter Molyneux was saying at GDC something like PC gaming is 'all Sims and *WOW*', which I think is a little too doom and gloom for me," says Long. "There have been plenty of times when you've had the one game to rule them all,

took *EverQuest* five years to reach half a million players and *Final Fantasy XI* two years; *Tabula Rasa*'s population might seem slow to rise, but if it follows MMOG norm its growth will be inexorable. "An example we always point to is *Eve Online*, which has done this incredible job of building a large subs base over a long period," says Long. "And that's our focus – not so much on 'oh we didn't meet those numbers'. The fact that we have a strong community, a really good game, and we're going to keep growing it and making the game better every day – that drives us and we've got a really strong foundation." Building that foundation is a difficult craft, but as NCSoft Austin shows, maintaining it is nothing less than a delicate art.





BIG UNFRIENDLY GIANTS

Admit it: if you're a long-serving gamer, you're almost definitely au fait with the Rage Punch. That sudden, explosive venting of anguish after shuffling off your virtual coil for the Nth time, where the only course of action is to unleash a wild, incensed fist into a nearby cushion, pillow or sofa, accompanied by a piercing animal shriek. Variations include the Pad Slam (flinging the controller to the floor, sometimes accompanied by a dismayed screech as it bounces back into your face) and the Angry Wrestler (standing bolt upright and shuddering your whole body with primal tension). If Sony or Nintendo wanted to put their motion-sensing input devices to innovative use, introducing adaptive difficulty based on detection of the aforementioned techniques would be one giant leap for gaming kind. The Rage Punch comes on the back of a relentless and 'unfair' string of deaths. Perhaps a double-jump that asked millimetre precision or a deathmatch where a rocket-hogger is in full-on spam mode. But anecdotal evidence would suggest that the most common cause is boss fights.

Again, everyone must have at least one nemesis that they've never conquered, one boss that turned them away from a game that they were otherwise savouring, and turned them away for good. Careless boss design can be ruinous. Rote boss design can be a significant mood killer. And good boss design won't necessarily count for much, in the grand scheme of an adventure. No one seems to consider the 'future' of boss fights. When was the last time you were recommended a game on the strength of its bosses? They're the elephant in the room,

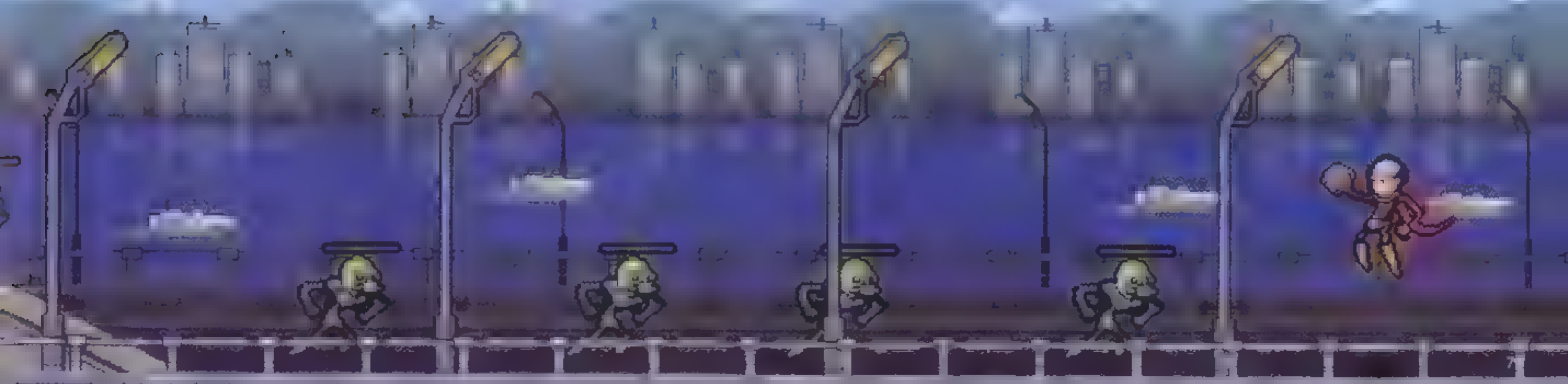
AND HISTORICALLY, BOSS BATTLES ARE IN NO DANGER OF EXTINGUISHING. DO BOSS BATTLES DESERVE THEIR PROMINENCE IN NIGHTMARE GAMING?

albeit one that can – and often does – gore you with its tusks. Their persistence is reptilian, and cold-blooded in manner. No one has ever said that boss gauntlets are a great idea, and yet you'll find one in a game as self-consciously accessible as *Devil May Cry 4*, where it feels like a habitual, reflex inclusion. *Halo*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Animal Crossing*, *Katamari Damacy* whenever a game abandons traditional boss fights, the absence isn't lamented. Developers seem to reach for them as automatically as cinema-goers reach for popcorn. Bosses cheat. They lie. They repeat soundbites over and over, and sometimes come prefaced by an unskippable speech that, swiftly, makes players testily jab at the buttons, even though they know they can't break the patter. They conceal multiple energy bars or, worse, they only reveal their 'true' form once you've expended all of your resources defeating their 'pretend' form. Talk about entrapment.

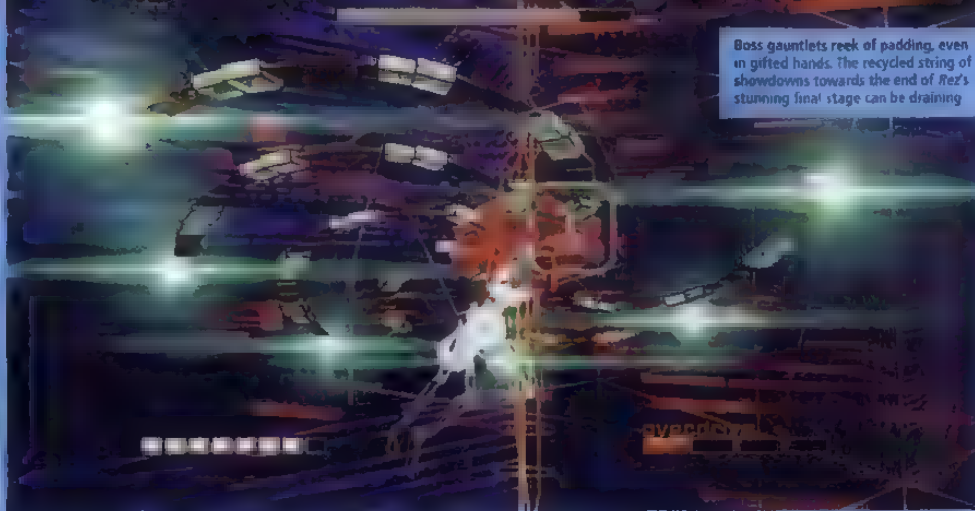
Consider this recent example, taken from THQ's *Conan*, and how familiar it may sound. For the overwhelming wealth of the game, you're given freedom to explore the combat system, flex your combo biceps and expand

your skill as you mullch your way through streams of thugs and minions. With your abilities list and instinct for counterattack timing at their peak, you reach the final boss. Suddenly, you're nothing but a hamster running on a treadmill, jumping and ducking spinning tendrils, waiting to activate a switch – and having to repeat the process three times – in order to win the day. Despite your powers being at their zenith, you're made to feel weaker than ever before, trapped in a piece of design that feels plastic and demeaning. It undermines the majority of what you've experienced – and likely enjoyed – up until this point. Or consider *BioShock*, whose closing skirmish is one of its least flattening moments, threatening to unbalance its efforts to craft an intelligent, absorbing adventure.

Beat 'em ups, for all their gratifying technical possibilities and achievements, have been especially guilty in recent times: think Jinpachi from *Tekken 5*, Alpha-152 from *Dead Or Alive 4* or Mizuchi from *Neo Geo Battle Coliseum*, each one seemingly determined to punish rather than challenge, snapping the difficulty curve into a vertical wall down which buckets of tar and feathers



Ninja Gaiden features famously crushing boss monstrosities. With a combat system this tight, the solution lies in your own skills, not cursing Tecmo and rooting about for the receipt



Boss gauntlets reek of padding, even in gifted hands. The recycled string of showdowns towards the end of *Rez*'s stunning final stage can be draining

are poured. *Street Fighter II*, now 17 years old, realised a much more elegant difficulty gradient in terms of its end-game confrontations. As a player, the final curtain is your crowning moment, the climax you've been drilling towards, and many a game seems eager to confuse glory with a stultifying impasse of a slog, such as the Mizar battle in *Jet Force Gemini*.

Such sticking points obviously aren't exclusive to the closing moments of a game. In the oft-overlooked *Urban Reign*, for example, its keen, accurate and rewarding brawling system topples in the face of Golem, a cruel juggernaut of an opponent that grinds all but the most bloody-minded of players to a halt. Or *Metroid Prime*, which saw forums echo with grumbles regarding Omega Pirate, as players vented their irritation at being held back from progressing further into an experience that they were otherwise deeply relishing. Or Fire Leo from *Viewtiful Joe*. And so on. You could even factor in a certain coherence-ruining foolishness for some examples, militaristic action games with human-soldier opponents and 'realistic' violence have no business squaring you off against an enemy general whose energy bar allows him to weather a dozen headshots. At least 'boss' is an ideal name for such uncaring, bottom-line-obsessed obstacles.



Why do we tolerate them still? Are momentum and familiarity the only reason they endure? If a switch could be thrown to drop them into gaming's room 101 and erase them outright, would we miss them? Despite myriad witnesses for the prosecution, yes, we would miss them. Boss fights harbour bad design principles, citing accepted convention or technical showboating as an excuse for lazy underlying construction, but they aren't intrinsically rotten. Making a boss fun to fight seems to play second fiddle to the effort needed to make a boss fight happen in the first place, which is why they can so regularly feel outmoded or outdated. It's a question of considering design as a resource.

In many combat-led games, you'll spend



problem children, when their appetites can be better fed. *Shadow Of The Colossus* turns boss battles into a primary concern and, despite its confrontations focusing ultimately on the exploitation of weak spots, the result is far from ungainly. Side scrolling Mega

BOSS BATTLES ARE A HINDRANCE, BUT WHICH IS BESPOKE, AN EPIC CREATION THAT MOVES AND ATTACKS IN UNIQUE WAYS.

the majority of your playtime tussling with cronies and cannon fodder, bosses are a minority, but each is bespoke and industrious to manufacture, an epic creation that moves and attacks in unique ways. Hulking though each may be, the slim interval of presence perhaps makes it economically difficult to lavish great attention on fine tuning. They become more palatable, these swollen

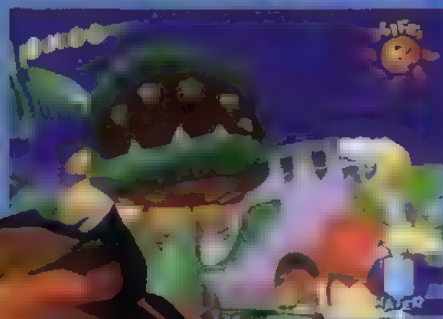
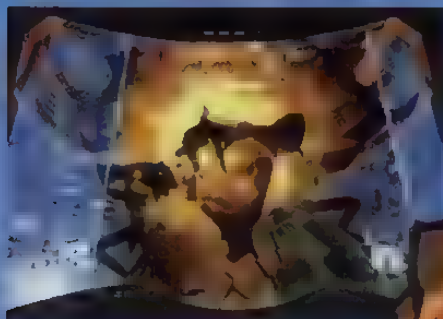
Drive game *Alien Soldier* is little else but a sequence of boss fights, but such emphasis allows each encounter to feel both grand and weldy. Sega's *Blood Will Tell*, a lengthy hack 'n' slash escapade based on Tezuka Osamu's Dororo manga, profits from a bigger-picture context. The game contains 48 fiends, boss fights that aren't fantastically designed, but the defeat of each rewards your character with a new body part. Each of these examples points towards two distinct concepts at play behind those levathans that punctuate your progress: boss characters and boss fights. Just because a developer can craft intimidating monstrosities that both fill the screen and shake it, doesn't mean it can make the ensuing struggle feel like a suitably blockbuster collision.

Good boss fights have three key roles that aren't mutually exclusive: showboating, gatekeeping and jury duty. Showboating is the most common success, injecting visual drama and chestbeating feats of technical accomplishment into proceedings. Of the boss fights that have ever driven a player to the Rage Punch, it's extremely unlikely that the setting and enemy involved feel weldy.

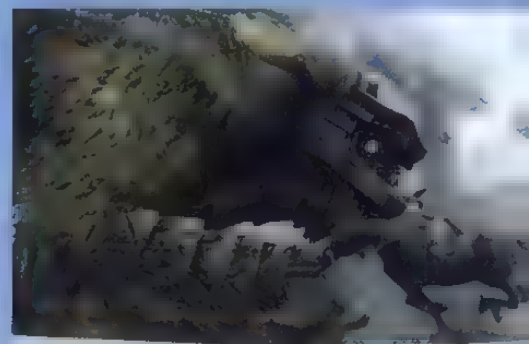
One-on-one challenges in *Ridge Racer 6* have all the hallmarks of the extreme boss spot: absolute punishment for the slightest of errors while your rival has a seemingly unlimited supply of nitrous



BOSS HOG: NINTENDO



and underwhelming. This grandeur intersects with gatekeeping, a function felt most consistently in RPGs and shoot 'em ups, but regularly occurs elsewhere. Bosses are a plump full stop to bring a stage to an end, open up a new area or provide the next widget fragment in your quest to reunite the mystic widget medallion. They're the reason to conserve medikits, special attacks and fancy-pants ammo, and hone your skills. When the beast topples and the chaos settles, it's a definite crescendo-closure that lets you breathe out a heavy sigh before hungrily breathing in whatever fresh treats await around the next corner. This connects with the idea of boss-as-juror, passing judgement on the abilities you've amassed and your capacity to adapt. This is your chance to showboat. The weak-spot principle, while often lamely applied, is a vital exam – being able to thread the needle under pressure is a fine rite of passage. A boss defeat is trophy-style proof of your potency. We like to be pushed – paying a certain price is an important aspect of feeling worthy – but not pushed away. You want to be David slaying Goliath, but you don't want to have to dumbly run in circles while Goliath spins around with his fists outstretched for a minute, waiting for him to dizzy so that you can get some feeble, opportunistic hits in, before retreating to a safe distance and repeating. That's not empowering. It's glorified, choreographed powerlessness.

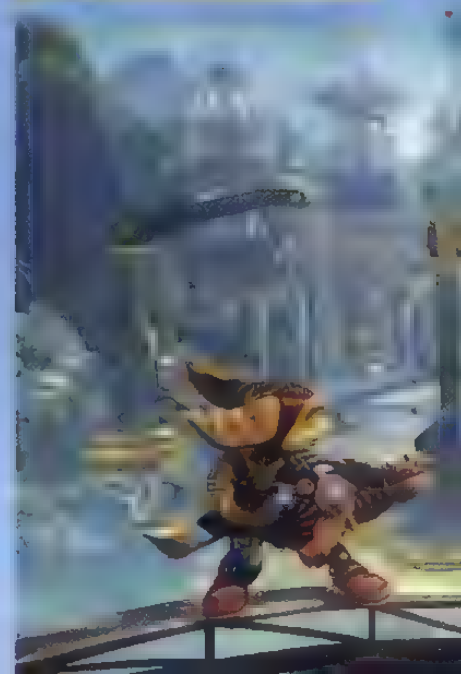


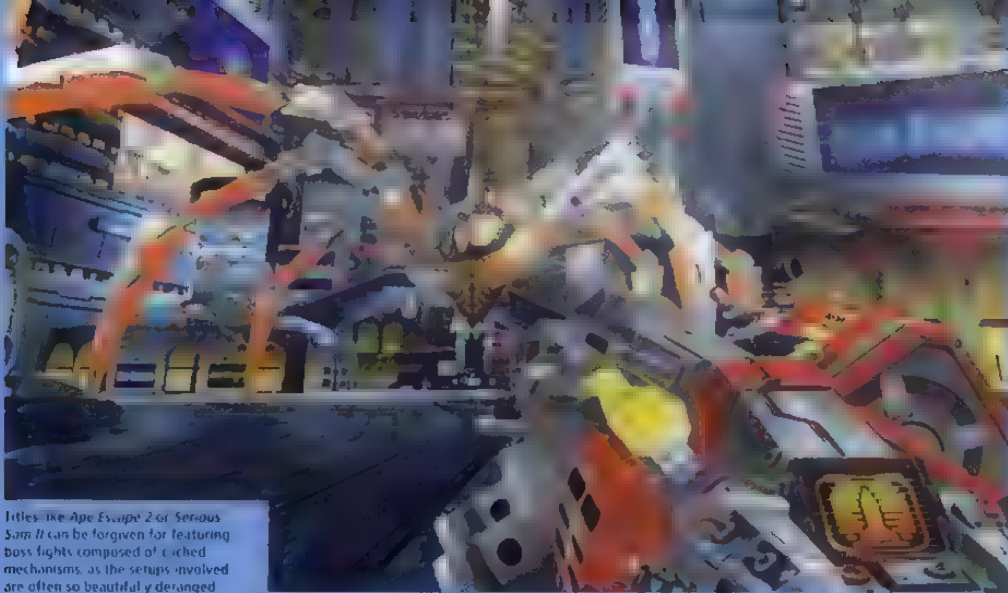
God of War glorified the use of QTEs at pivotal moments in boss fights. In terms of actual interaction these didn't up the sophistication, but allowed them to play out in a dramatic fashion that raised clashes to boiling point.

BOSS HOG: CAPCOM



Which brings us back to an earlier observation – boss fights needn't be stuttered and inept, stumbled by their obligatory nature. But they do have to walk a hazardous line. They have to threaten, but in such a way that enables you to offer your own menace. They have to shout about their strength, while also offering glimpses of their weakness. They have to charge a toll, but not lock you out for not carrying the exact change. And we know this is possible because it's often achieved. To answer a previous question, yes, there are games that could happily dine out on the strength of their traditionally-placed boss battles. Think *Gunstar Heroes'* furiously creative stand-offs, the inventive possibilities and post-modernism of the *Metal Gear Solid* series bosses, the searing discipline and precision assaults of *Gradius Vs* enemy spacecraft or the palpable, playful, personality-rich showdowns to be had in *Super Mario Galaxy*. These games run a gamut in terms of boss fight structures. You can doubtlessly add your own to that list, but any games that appear on it will have two things in common. First, they'll have great respect for your in-game faculties, ushering you towards brinksmanship against foes that tout a refined balance of peril and frailty. Second, they'll be created by developers synonymous





Titles like *Ape Escape 2* or *Serious Sam II* can be forgiven for featuring boss fights composed of cycled mechanisms, as the setups involved are often so beautifully deranged



MMORPGs are perhaps where bosses feel at their most void, where any stonewalling on behalf of such conflicts only goes to galvanise the subsequent teamwork, social reward, heroism and bragging rights

with adept, imaginative design in more than just boss fights. Nintendo, Treasure, Sega, Capcom, and so on. Through them, the boss canon has evolved – and necessarily so. In 16bit times, cannon fodder and foot soldiers of many action games really were just that, their attacks providing a challenge but rarely anything more. In recent years, the general increase in intricacy and input sophistication means that in, say, *Ninja Gaiden Black*, every set of enemies makes for a strategic, flexible set-piece. Or compare Sega's early *Shinobi* titles with the PS2 update, whose combo system turned hacking and slashing into the ninja equivalent of knitting

It would be foolish to think that boss fights will die out. The concept of a 'boss', however, may be in jeopardy thanks to a new strain of opponent: the super-enemy. Consider *Crackdown*'s 'bosses', the 21 crime lords that dot the game world. They pack multiple energy bars, carry heavy weapons

and are well-guarded by both troops and level design. They feel like glorified enemies rather than brick walls, which leaves your tactics as open as anywhere else in the game. Consider *Halo 3*'s Scarab tanks, which arrive in the midst of an existing battle, upping the tempo without having to whisk you away to a bespoke arena. Or even the high-ranking Brutes. Or many moments in the previous *Halo* titles where a pair of Covenant Elites

format is usurped somewhat, retaining the tension, splendour and gratification, with less irritation and conceit in tow.

This is hardly the bigger picture of gaming's future, but it is an increasing part of it. And for all the exasperation for which bosses have been responsible, they've brought plenty of elation to the table. While bad boss design can be ruinous, there's inevitable joy in seeing such awkward,



THOUGH IT'S AN INCREASING SENSE THAT GAMERS ARE MERELY TOLERATING BOSS FIGHTS RATHER THAN REVENING THEM

can transform a seemingly vanilla battle into something as hard-fought as a boss scrap. Or *Manhunt*'s chilling encounter with Piggy. As games strive to become worlds, the walls are coming down, blurring the boundaries between the troops and their general. The principles behind boss fights persist, but the

cantankerous bastards vanquished. And these victories are as memorable an acquisition as any 360 Achievement. They require a cool-head, concentration and kinship with your character, a temporary, extreme stress that can engross unlike anything else. But they can also callously spit you out in an equally unique fashion. They make it a thin line between punching the air and punching the furniture, and that's part and parcel of the fascination. With accessibility now a prime concern, the peril is not in bosses becoming an endangered species – they're just too well-established – but a certain cross-section of players themselves, after one too many Pad Slams, you may not want to pick the controller up off the floor for quite some time. Such fallout hasn't been widely felt, and there's been no apparent migration of boss-fatigue sufferers, but there's an increasing sense that gamers are merely tolerating boss fights rather than revering them. It's difficult to gauge just how much of the enthusiasm bar is being chipped away, as it's a phenomenon that's not exclusive to any particular format, genre or franchise. But if they want to be a proud and shining part of gaming's future, bosses have to learn to better respect the most damaging special attack that all players are capable of: switching the game off.



Perfect *Dark Zero*'s final boss is one of the more ludicrous in recent memory. It's not that it's too easy – sure, that's an issue for some – more its befuddling context. In an ethereal arena stocked with floating rocks, it's devoid of any impact or role





XBOX 360

THE OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

World Exclusive Review

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Review

Edge's most played

Jet Set Radio Future



Diving back into the vibrant colours of Tokyo-To is as intoxicating as the first time, and that soundtrack just gets better with age. Come on, Sega, the third one's the charm. **XBOX, SEGA**

Rainbow Six Vegas 2



We may make a rag together, but a succession of blue-on-blue incidents suggest that Team Edge may not be quite so suited to combating the forces of terrorism. **360, PC, PS3, JBSOFT**

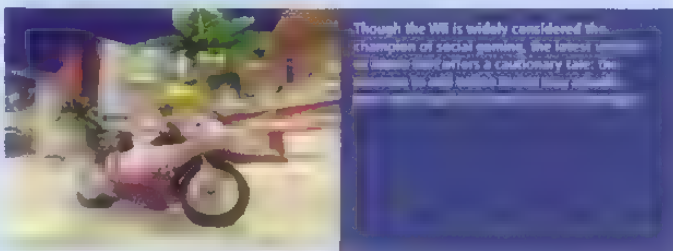
GTA: San Andreas



As *GTAIV*'s release nears, another trip through its slick, audacious predecessor beckoned. As far-fetched as they are, we think we're going to miss those jetpacks. **PC, PS2, XBOX, ROCKSTAR**

Socially acceptable

Is social gaming losing sight of its past?




It was only a short time ago that 'social gaming' conjured up but a few possible images. A living room populated with crumpled beer cans and full ashtrays; four friends huddled around for a protracted *GoldenEye* session, wiping the sleep from their eyes as they peer at a quarter of a TV screen. Or perhaps a spaghetti of wires and monitors and pizza boxes – the telltale signs of a LAN party. More recently, the Wii, with its slew of party games and cleverly pitched advertisements, has come to epitomise local multiplayer – mates on a couch together, flailing away with Remote and Nunchuk.

But the story of social gaming has another strand to it – one that Nintendo has been criticised for failing to bring to the Wii. Ever-increasing connectivity may have extended socialisation, but Nintendo has been cautious to embrace online gaming, maybe doubtful that the internet really offers the same pleasure as playing with your friends in a single room. If *Mario Kart Wii* is anything to go by, then the answer may be that catering to one can undermine the other. It's the first Nintendo game that feels like it's been built from

the ground up as an online experience – something for which many have been crying out. Certainly, with 12 players online, *Mario Kart Wii* offers something completely new to the series. The problem is, this comes at the expense of *Mario Kart*'s most beloved feature (at least in this office) – fourplayer splitscreen.

The option's still there, of course – Nintendo hasn't gone completely loco – but the new tracks are clearly designed for races with three times the players. There's a sense that Nintendo has given in to the novelty of bigger numbers, creating a saleable hook at the expense of one of the series' most loveable features.

The mistake here is an old one. The progress of technology creates opportunities to attain that which was previously impossible. But, whether we're talking about motion-sensitive controls or the ability to throw more players on to a track, there's no value in having these features simply because they suddenly became possible. As Nintendo tests the online waters, it needs to think carefully about what it hopes to achieve – and whether that will come at the cost of what it already has. 



Mario Kart Wii
WII



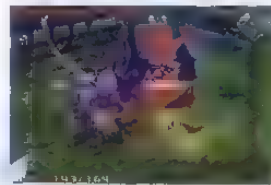
88 Dark Sector
360, PS3

Viking: Battle For Asgard
360, PS3



93 Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty
360, PC, PS3

94 The World Ends With You
DS



95 Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring Of Fates

96 Mystery Dungeon: Shiren The Wanderer
DS

97 Destroy All Humans: Big Willy Unleashed
WII

97 Insecticide
DS, PC

98 Eco Creatures: Save The Forest
DS

98 Nanostray 2
DS

99 Dementium: The Ward
DS

Rocketmen: Axis Of Evil
XBOX

Edge



Mii appear throughout, as eager spectators, track blocking nuisances and playable characters. In one smart turn, the physical size of your Mii body is taken into account to slot them into the correct weight class



There are few gaming locations as lonely as first place in *Mario Kart Wii*. Pitched as a chance to spend a day at the races with your favourite Nintendo mascots, at the front of the pack you find you've left the gang behind, aside from the occasional blue shell flung by the cruel AI. Where the grand adventures that spawned the cast pride themselves on discovery, storming ahead here is rewarded with nothing more than eerie stretches of tarmac, made all the emptier by their bloating to accommodate the 12-kart starting grid.

Such bloat wasn't always the way. Face the 16-track retro cup and memories flood back of surgically pressed SNES shoulder buttons to squeeze a win from tight bends. While zipping through a fattened Ghost Valley 2 or Mario Circuit reminds of hard-fought victories, those pixel-perfect racing lines are rendered obsolete. It's felt more so in new courses. Luigi Circuit appears as wide as it is long and so generous are the labyrinthine walkways of Coconut Mall that one must plot racing lines within racing lines.



The liberal architect's handiwork extends beyond course design. A new boosting mechanic does away with the analogue tweaking drifts of previous incarnations; drift length instead determines speed boosts. While the righteous will celebrate the death of *Mario Kart DS's* dreaded snaking, it does come at the cost of some skill. Indeed, switching between amateur automatic and expert manual drift reveals nothing more than a hop separating the two. Sure, automatic refuses you a boost reward, but never has the title 'expert' been so cheaply given away.

Just one race with the packaged Wii Wheel justifies, or rather betrays, the reasoning behind the tweaked boost. Failing to respond to split-second tweaks, the kind of furious handiwork that would be required to steer in and out of the drift leave no place for the old technique. Abandoning the wheel for an analogue stick – Nunchuck, Classic Controller and GameCube pad are supported – the series' solid steering instantly returns, but the wheel's shadow looms in those sweeping bends and slightly sticky karts.

Arguably, such sloppiness is simply a continuation of that prioritisation of fun over technicality that so divided *Double Dash's* audience. However, this is to overlook additions that attempt to deepen the races played out on the unwieldy fields, finding again that time-trial impetus that *Double Dash* lost. A new bike class adds a preliminary choice: do you stick with the tried and tested kart or take to Mario's dirt bike or Peach's more respectable scooter for a lighter, if boost-starved, ride? The decision will be swayed further by the bike's wheelie capacity that sees slight acceleration at the price of being susceptible to shunts.

Not that karts are written out of the trick



Half pipes are particularly ripe stunt spots, although the hectic trick animations can cause confusion over exactly where you'll land. The aim is to approach at such an angle as to propel yourself forward without sacrificing height



Items can again be lobbed forward and backward, a bleep from the Remote speaker and a warning icon indicate exactly when and where a weapon is launched. Avoiding blue shells is impossible, but reds need not spell doom for the eagle-eyed



The three classes branch further with multiple karts and bikes for each competitor. But there's nothing as inspired as Luigi's Pottergust 4000, and that each kart has unique stats only adds further to the flabby state of time-trial



equation; a stunt-boost is available to both classes. Any raised surface – be it deliberate ramp or minor track blemish – can give birth to a trick, and the act of rooting out time-trimming hillocks adds to racing strategy. Previously unwise routes on retro tracks now sport temptress-like ramps to lure you into a reassessment of racing lines, and most of the new tracks were seemingly constructed by a designer with an aversion to spirit levels. Indeed, swerving down the lump-abundant DK's Snowboard Cross, we defy any future FAQ authors to preach a perfect racing line.

Nintendo is trying to teach an old time-trial dog some new tricks, but with its online efforts it has pampered the pooch to the extent that much of its age has been hidden



Tracks borrowed from the SNES and GBA iterations display a particularly clean style, the fidelity to the Mode 7 textures paying dividends. Piping out the original tunes also adds to the retro air, despite their increased girths striving to block the happy memories

The new tracks were seemingly constructed by a designer with an aversion to spirit levels. We defy any future FAQ authors to preach a perfect line

installing a Mario Kart Channel on the Wii dashboard not only grants instant access to leaderboards and downloadable rival ghosts, but finally finds a way of presenting online functionality on the Wii's own terms. Rubbing shoulders with weather and news updates, the channel brings online play into normal everyday perspective. No longer squarred away behind countless wifi connection menus, it serves to remind the expanded audience that the world of competition is as ever-changing as the sky outside their window.

While we wait to see if grandma steps up from Mii artisan to karting ace, seasoned Mario Kart fans are left with online competition offering both a *Mario Kart Wii* strength and a low point for the series. Built around 12 players, the various modes offer

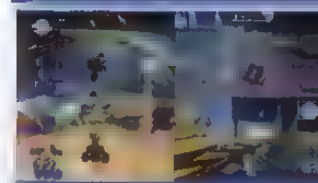
increasing fun for every slot filled. With 11 human foes, barren courses seem a little busier, the patented Wacky Races insanity returning courtesy of the Machiavellian divvying up of items. While there is nothing more galling than an AI kart receiving a race-winning tool for dawdling in 12th position, the constant table-turning is more acceptable amongst friends.

Start plucking away those friends – or indeed, random online strangers – and the AI sidles into place with its usual brand of party-pooper. This is most violently felt in local splitscreen multiplayer. When taken in concert with slowdown, eight computer bullies can easily overwhelm races. You can play without AI but the wide courses, tailored to 12 racers, will feel very empty. Team games – including the horribly deformed

Balloon Fight (see 'Balloon burst') – are particularly unpleasant, able human players paired with unreliable allies to undermine their cunning strategies.

Undercutting local multiplayer to benefit the online movement is a grievous error. Of all the multiplayer franchises, we struggle to think of a title in which four friends sat side by side seemed more natural. Having sacrificed racing integrity in *Double Dash* to side with social silliness, Nintendo has turned 180 degrees into an awkward halfway house. It's a respite from where it has attempted to regain time-trial credentials with the poorest racing yet – and sees the company finally find its online feet by betraying one of its great pastimes. Perhaps first place in *Mario Kart Wii* isn't the least enjoyable occasion in gaming after all. [6]

Balloon burst



A classic last-man-standing scenario, Balloon Fight has been gutted and replaced with a tepid point-scoring slog. The 12 karts are divided into multiple teams – AI filling the gaps – and you have three minutes to pop as many balloons as possible. Lose your three lives and you return to the arena with another three to continue the fight. Gone are the taut cat and mouse encounters, replaced with the *Mario Kart* equivalent of Hungry, Hungry Hippos. Madness.



Where most games would have you confirm your changes at the checkout, here you commit your weapon upgrades the second you first press the button. With so few weapon slots to play with, this can lead to irksome, lasting mistakes.

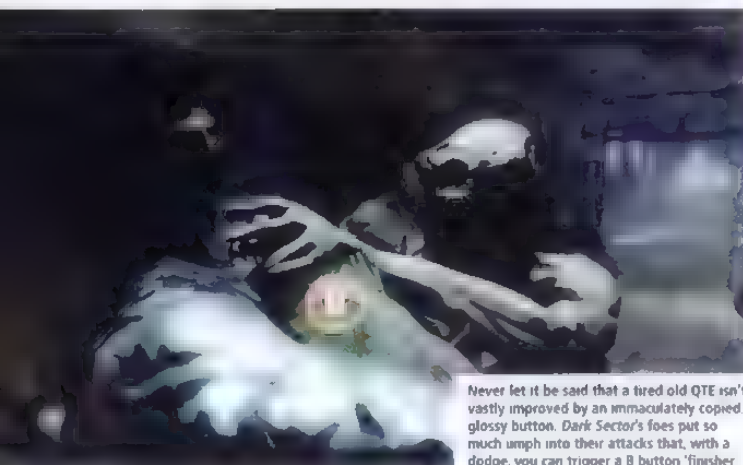
Th Dark Sector Canadian studio Digital Extremes has created a Frankenstein's monster that actually works. Its mind is sound, its looks beautiful, its sutures invisible and its stolen parts functional in all the intended ways. It has no soul, of course, nor distinct personality, but that's the nature of the beast.

Its movement system is identical to that found in *Gears Of War*, right down to the bounding "Roadie run", the button tap rolls and the magnetic cover points. Its hero, a nondescript pretty-boy called Hayden Tanno, is an over-the-shoulder military type with a

This is a slick shooter with its eye on the things that matter: instant gratification, fierce performance and stunning visuals.

cast-iron emo fringe. Its enemies have transferred, it seems, from the rank-and-file of *Killzone*, *Rogue Trooper* and *Devil May Cry*, with bosses ranging from Kojimaesque mechs to Capcom vaudevillians. And then there's the glave, a limb-rending, tri-bladed Frisbee with *Heavenly Sword*-style aftertouch and elemental powers, much like those of *BioShock*.

The story runs thus: After a mysterious outbreak, much of the Soviet bloc has been



Never let it be said that a tired old QTE isn't vastly improved by an immaculately copied glossy button. *Dark Sector's* foes put so muchumph into their attacks that, with a dodge, you can trigger a B button "finisher"



How to spoil an immersive, HUD-free journey into uncharted waters: put chirpy Russian shopkeepers in manholes. "So, you've come to see how capitalism really worksch?" he beams as you appear, with a single button-press, in his hideaway.

quarantined, prompting the arrival of lone, reluctant clear-up man Tanno. He's reluctant, of course, partly because of some ill-defined traumatic backstory and partly because being a videogame hero bears all the hallmarks of a suicide mission. Minutes into his investigation, he's infected - in this case skewered by an absurdly-armoured samurai villain - which has the neat side-effect of giving him murderous mutant abilities.

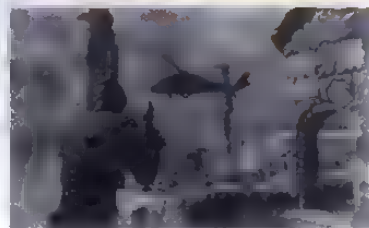
Dozens of reviews have reeled off similar synopses, and called out similar plagiarisms, for far worse games than this one. The difference is motivation. Much like its developer's breakthrough game, *Unreal Tournament*, *Dark Sector* doesn't steal to prosper so much as learn and refine. As a bid

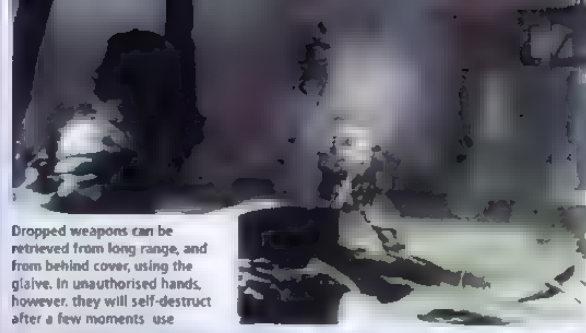
to evolve the action game by steps rather than jumps, its credentials are no less sound than those of *Stranglehold* and, to be frank, *Gears Of War*. If any games have a right to feel robbed, they're games like *Kill Switch* and *Operation Winback* - and they must surely be used to it by now.

This is a slick, sophisticated shooter with its eye set perfectly on the things that matter: instant, recyclable gratification, puzzles requiring scarcely more thought than a trigger-pull, fierce performance and stunning visuals. Much of the time, its Evolution Engine seems more efficient, malleable and attractive than Unreal Engine 3, drawing finer lines and striking greater contrasts, perhaps at the cost of fancier special effects. Presentation throughout, in fact, is top notch.

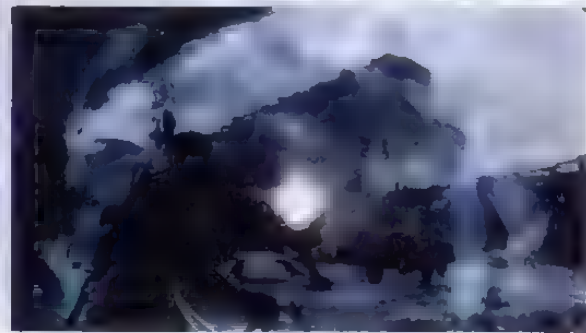
Never is this more obvious than in the opening mission, a more traditional spy setup shot in striking black-and-white, introducing Tanno as a self-doubting yet sympathetic lead, and his world as one where panic engulfs a collapsing military machine. Already, as you negotiate body bags and chemical showers, loudspeakers sound an order to "execute all remaining civilians," setting up a story that's sadly never explored. Early gunplay is tight, rewarding swift headshots with instant kills, while the AI tries to flush you out with grenades, suppressing fire and short dashes between any nearby cover.

It's a high that neither the loopy plot nor mutant enemies can sustain past the opening act, though the arrival of the glave keeps





Dropped weapons can be retrieved from long range, and from behind cover, using the glaive. In unauthorised hands, however, they will self-destruct after a few moments' use.



Progress in *Dark Sector* automatically unlocks improved glaive powers: the ability to steer it using a chase-cam, perform a power-throw with a perfectly timed release, or charge it with elemental power before detonating it in midair. Ice, fire and electricity are the elements in question, harnessed by either smashing temporary stores (light fittings, for instance), creating permanent ones out of burning wreckage, or seeking out generators hidden in the environment. Enemies and puzzles service all of these at one point or other, robots vulnerable only to a short-circuit, some locks tucked behind fences requiring a parabolic throw. The ice glaive is especially rewarding, able to freeze falling water into defensive pillars and turn entire canals into traversable paths.



A typical puzzle involves an obstruction, be it an electric door lock or flammable sheet of mutant gunk, then tracking down the means of removing it. It may require a third step: creating a source of flame, ice or electricity from the environment.



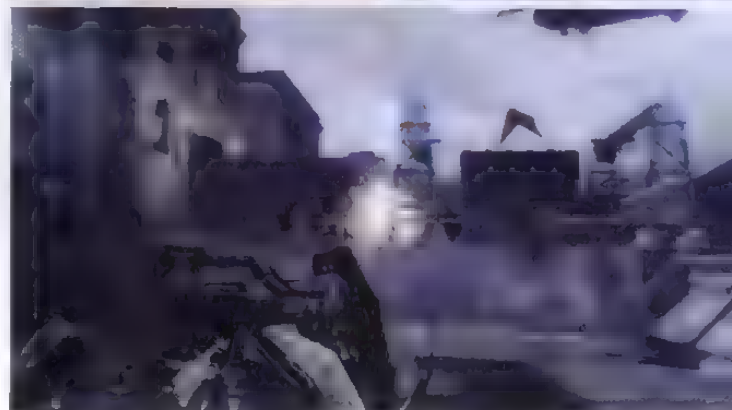
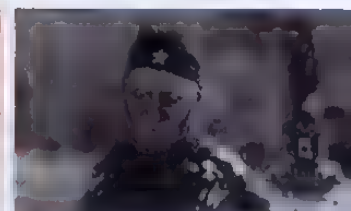
everything spinning. Key to what's best described as a 'lop-and-pop' experience, it's dispatched and controlled using one side of the controller, the other reserved for quick pistol shots and movement. Solid, if not entirely convincing, physics mean that kills can be either cruelly precise or spectacularly random, the glaive slicing off heads or ricocheting into alcoves, sending concealed body parts flying. This dynamic, perhaps more accidental than the game lets on, extends the life of its combat tenfold (and more so than any of its subsequent power-ups (see 'Spin city').

The game never seems to mind that its headshots, later weapons, splash damage and abundant ammo make it overly easy to complete, its bosses attempting little more than to inconvenience you to death, charging you with lumbering attacks and a generous supply of hit points. This, though, in a game that suffers a dearth of inspiration during its later stages, might well be a saving grace. In line, say, with *Assassin's Creed*, it never strongarms you with an inescapable, indulgent narrative, nor assumes a

willingness to be frustrated or stalled. Its merger of Japanese and American design values, evident throughout, is among the most fruitful of recent years.

In multiplayer, where it splits into two game types, playable both online or off thanks to barebones bot support, it benefits from dogged refusal to reduce Tanno, *Halo*-style, to a mere army of clones. Similar to *MGS3*, *Subsistence*'s Sneaking mode (Infection casts one player as a glaive-equipped Tanno and sets everyone else on his scent. Epidemic, meanwhile, is a more traditional team game, each side led by its own hero and encouraged to kill his opposite number for maximum points) is a modest suite, good for days rather than weeks, but ample given the swift migration patterns of today's online gamers.

Easily dismissed as a pastiche, *Dark Sector* proves that grand vision is no prerequisite for sharp design and arresting play. But it's a shame to see Digital Extremes, such an obviously talented studio, deferring still to the wisdom of others. One day, this skilled weaponsmith will find a story to tell. [7]



Dark Sector seldom rips something off without some kind of improvement. Mech combat introduces countermeasures to the usual rockets and minigun, launched in response to an inbound missile alarm.

VIKING: BATTLE FOR ASGARD

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: CREATIVE ASSEMBLY PREVIOUSLY W/ ETHER, BVA

Viking. *Battle For Asgard* has a problem, and a befuddling one at that. It doesn't make any sense that it's not brilliant. Of course, there are reasons why this review carries the score it does, but *Viking's* shortfalls just seem so peculiar when compared to the surging competency of its strengths. The stall it sets out is confident and vivacious, a third-person adventure with a laudable overarching vision: with you, as Viking Skann, trotting around the land, battling the Hel scourge and liberating captured troops before recruiting them into your army. The payoff for accruing such human resources and other supplies is that each of the three levels – there are just three, but each is sizeable – climaxes with an all-out brawl of heroic proportions, as the Hel HQ is assaulted and toppled.

Viking is built upon arcade values, and nails them with efficient, spry energy. Combat is slotted together from basic combos, blocks, dodges, fatality kills and a handful of special attacks. It's not complex, but it is brawny enough to convey the sensation of brutality while remaining clean enough to be wieldy. And however weary you may be of stealth elements, here they're

Each of the three sizeable levels climaxes with an all-out brawl of heroic proportions, as the Hel HQ is assaulted and toppled

QTE sequences for slaying elite Hel aren't an irritation, especially when they're framed in such a dynamic, up-close fashion. However, having to tap 'B' for the majority of interactions – opening doors and chests, activating teleport stones, unlocking barriers – quickly dulls



Bags, urns and chests filled with gold are scattered around the land, and can be hunted out by purchasing treasure maps. Casks of mead can be found on the shorelines, but these are simply for selling to tavern owners, in return for more gold.



integrated splendidly. When Skann comes within detection distance of enemies, he automatically hunches into stealth mode with no loss in movement speed or mobility. When spotted, he'll draw his weapons, and so the whole system keeps you naturally informed without intruding. It's worthwhile too: picking off a handful of Hel archers or shield-bearing warriors on the fringe of a battalion feels like it tips the odds in your favour when you're eventually noticed. And the Hel actually want to fight. Try to run from a fracas, and you'll be cut down by Hel dashing and slashing at your cowardly hide, and rarely missing. Once a fight has started, it has to be finished, meaning your husher moment to stride into view can often feel daring.

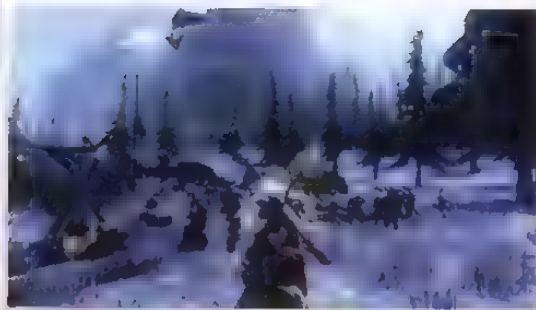
Then there's the technical pedigree. The visible portions of each stage take in widely spaced landmarks, and enemies are present even if they're little other than splatters on a beach, viewed from a towering cliff, and transporting yourself between teleport stones dotted across the landscape is instant wherever you decide to hop to. Its visuals set up a vibrant pitch between *Obi-wan's* verdant countryside and *Fable's* cartoony warmth, while the size of its stages hit a certain gray they feel expansive, but not overly so, in terms of covering ground on-foot. And its

populations are immense, hosting genuine regions of allies or Hel soldiers.

But for all that groundwork, and just an hour or two into *Viking*, a heavy-set blandness begins to seep through: it's unavoidably clear that your role, for all the game's freedom of travelling, is virtually one-note. Head to a quarry, farm or watchtower. Cleanse it of Hel. Recruit troops or tick another box that takes you one step



In regions inhabited by Hel, the world is overcast, rainy and smothered with gloom. To see the land liberated – the sky clears, and vitality returns to the flora – is a pleasant way to represent what is, essentially, a gang war.



One enjoyable aspect to any given raid set-piece is the timing of when you decide to free any captured soldiers. When you bust open their jail, remaining enemies in the vicinity become alerted, resulting in a minor but frantic clash.

closer to the criteria for initiating an assault on the Hel base at the far end of the stage. That's not the entirety of the experience, but that's how it seems, all too soon. The framework feels woefully underemployed. There's no significant sub-questing, and there's an unhealthy absence of character progress on. The climactic battles are hectic, but there's still a repetition of process that undercuts the achievement of what's in motion; dragon sorties are thrown into the fray, but you'll need to kill elite Hel or a shaman to earn the requisite gems, and then use them to kill remaining shamans – and this procedure dominates. Suddenly we're back in that period, a few years previous, when open-world games were providing strong worlds and making players feel freshly empowered. *Destiny*, *Ark: Survival Evolved*, *Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* – but failing to provide equally absorbing missions.

There are still moments of focus that reward. Clambering through a longboat

graveyard – Skarrin is capable of more than just slashing and skulking, after all – is pleasing, a rare moment of exploration rather than traversing. And the pure stealth missions, involving the infiltration of the Hel's most well-guarded settlements, are an unexpected treat. They're lengthy and mistakes can be fatal, but the organic nature of the mission and the league of opponents that lurk just behind the side of a low wall results in some exhilarating tension. But for a game to be so sawy at its fundament and

exhibit such talent – and yet feel so stumpy – is almost absurd. It's as if it aimed to be a bloodthirsty, blade-punisher *Crackdown* – each major set-piece showdown is seamlessly woven into the world around it, with plentiful angles of approach – but having a Spartan army of one brawler instead of a superhero means that lack of conceptual variety is harmful. Sadly, Creative Assembly poured its grand battle theatrics into a combat mode more effectively with *Spartan Total Warrior*.

[6]



When you assault and cleanse a settlement, you'll recruit several dozen soldiers for your campaign. Just freeing them isn't enough, however; you'll almost always be required to perform a paltry cake-icing quest to convince them to fall in. Often, these are little other than fetch objectives, or further killing, at a nearby location. To have them appear so consistently – and so drearily – is part of *Viking's* exhausting lack of variance. Although, one particular post-cleansing quest, based on investigating a worrying noise emanating from a nearby row of cliffs, gives cause to crack an overdue smile.



“Talented developers can’t get backing for their projects... I don’t want them to create Brain Age games”

Hideo Kojima, March 13, 2008

Read Hideo Kojima's fears for the future of games development in “The Games You Must Play Before You Die” – available only with PSM3 Issue 100



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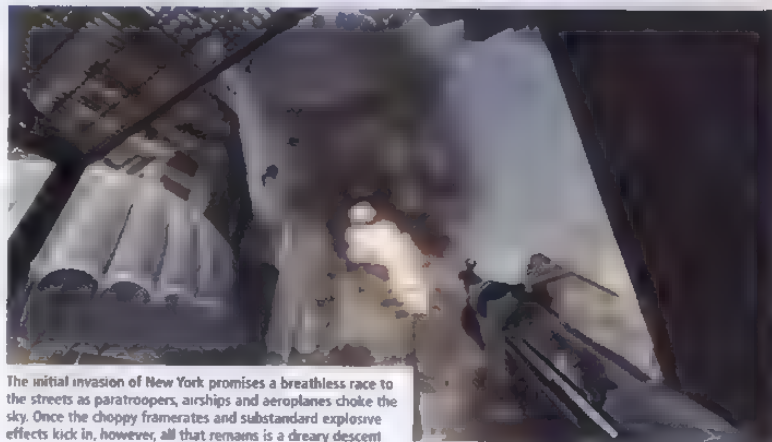




Turning Point's central conceit is the stuff that apocalyptic fantasies are made of. In its world of skewed history, Hitler has conquered Europe, England is beaten and leaderless and the action begins as the German army launches a full-blooded invasion of America, kicking off with New York City. This airborne assault on the Big Apple, viewed from the lead character's perspective high atop the exposed steel bones of a half-built skyscraper, is an inspired opening sequence, the oncoming Nazi force imposing and intimidating. Unfortunately, the game succeeding this fine scenario almost immediately begins to crumble.

Most alarming is how clumsy *Turning Point* has rendered the 360 joypad, a controller otherwise renowned for its FPS credentials. As you guide the unarmed Dan Carson towards street level as the invasion erupts it feels as if his feet drag like a bored teenager's. Movement is sluggish, as is the slothful speed at which the right stick revolves Carson's view. The surprise is that such basic errors have come from a developer that cut its teeth on the reasonably decent *Call Of Duty: Finest Hour*.

The situation only deteriorates once Carson lays his paws on a machine gun. While the likes of *Call Of Duty 4* and *Halo* have made console joypads feel snappy and responsive enough to challenge the PC's mouse and keyboard, *Turning Point* has scppily regressed the cause by a few years. Gunfights are a mess of the scrappy aiming readjustments of old, and switching



The initial invasion of New York promises a breathless race to the streets as paratroopers, airships and aeroplanes choke the sky. Once the choppy framerate and substandard explosive effects kick in, however, all that remains is a dreary descent

between the three sensibly options offering negligible improvement.

Sadly, *Turning Point*'s blunders extend far beyond matters of control. Pauses for loading crop up far too often (we counted less than ten seconds between two such breaks), and the framerate tends to chug even drawing the damp squibs that comprise its explosive effects. Moreover, invisible obstacles and floating corpses litter the environments, textures pop into view late, and on several occasions the AI seems randomly ignorant of Carson's presence.

In terms of design, a lack of efficient signposting means that it can be minutes before a player passes over the unseen lines that trigger the next level or piece of

dialogue. Missions, too, frequently involve the clunky bugbear of unnatural coincidences: an early strike on two tanks involves them helpfully, and incredibly, parked over huge holes that enable the player to plant a bomb underneath!

Turning Point at least sidesteps the over-familiar visual language that other WW II-era shooters are built around, with New York's iconic architecture and towering skyline lending some measure of lightweight plausibility. But, criminally, the game's rather interesting history-twisting idea never progresses beyond the initial and basic plot throughout Carson's short-lived (at five hours, plus change) rebellion. *Turning Point* leaves us wishing things were different. [3]



When grappling an enemy, climbing an obstacle or hauling Carson up a ledge, *Turning Point* pulls out into thirdperson. While it is, at least, only momentarily disorientating, the shift is never a comfortable or welcome one.

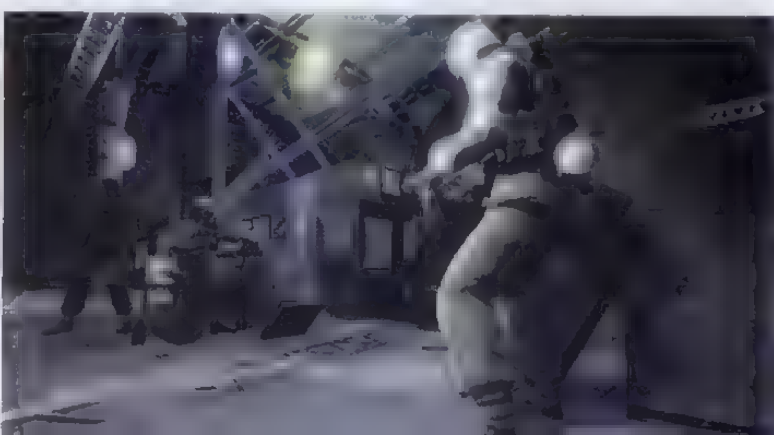
Push the button



Turning Point at least attempts to enliven the maddening gunplay by enabling Carson to seize hold of his enemies when up close. A quick button tap and a push of the D-pad, and you're either standing over a corpse or hauling around an unwilling human shield. But, as with other interactions, like activating switches or climbing ladders, it's often hard to find the precise place to stand to trigger the action, leading to standing nose-to-nose with enemies while they discharge round after round point blank into your chest.



Disappointingly, *Turning Point* never even attempts to live up to the scope of its central idea. The intriguing political, emotional and personal impacts of a German assault on an instantly familiar location are never satisfactorily explored.





THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: TRIANGLE HOUSE/JUPITER

Choose your own experience



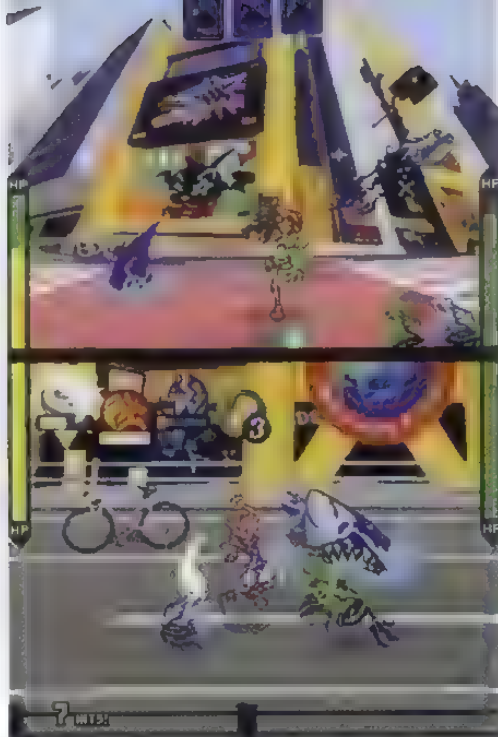
In another unique twist, the game allows you to set Neku's level at any time using a slider. It's possible to set this anywhere from the top level reached thus far all the way back down to his starting point. Lowering your level results in the difficulty of enemies and the amount of experience earned from battles reducing. However, as a pay-off, the drop rate increases, boosting your chances of finding new badges and expanding your move set. It's an ingenious idea that adds to the flexibility and depth that characterises the game's underlying mechanics.

Tetsuya Kando, director of *The World Ends With You*, has admitted that the development team decided on the game's setting – Tokyo's youthful and vibrant Shibuya district – before anything else. While it might not be a case of style over substance, it's clear right from the off that, like its closest reference point *Viewtiful Joe*, this is a game designed as style before substance.

From Tetsuya Nomura's lithe, fashionista character designs to the graffiti fonts, cute-dramatic-cute J-pop soundtrack and the self-conscious integration of mobile phones, MP3 players and pin badges into the game's mechanics, this is a title precision-targeted at the young Japanese who populate Shibuya's streets in both the game's reality and ours. The relentless styling hits the target, never feeling like the soulless result of corporate focus-testing, but it's also

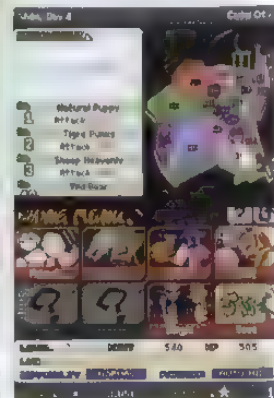


When either Neku or Shinki land a hit, a green flame passes to their teammate. Alternating blows sees the flame pass backwards and forwards, augmenting the power of your hits with each increase to the combo.



The same enemies appear on both screens at once, so if Neku defeats one, it will disappear from Shinki's screen and vice versa. You choose to engage Noise in battle or not, meaning it's possible to walk through areas without fear of encounters.

Both Neku and his sidekick share the same health bar, forcing players to keep an eye on both screens at once. Initially, the game will allow you to focus on one of the screens, allowing the AI to take over the second character with some rudimentary moves, but you must master dual control to get the most out of it.



overpowering and, coupled with the vogue petulance of teen protagonist Neku, ultimately distracts from the game's underlying merits.

The story provides the framework into which the gameplay slots. Neku is drawn into an esoteric seven-day competition hosted by a mysterious group of hooded gamesmasters known as the 'Reapers'. Every day he receives a task via text message which must be completed before sundown if he is to avoid being 'erased'. Unable to leave Shibuya and with a timer etched onto the back of his hand, Neku has no option but to participate, rushing through the streets of Shibuya from target location to location aided by a single companion.

The game is stuffed with cutscenes and extended dialogue but when control is wrested from the narrative, the action mechanics are deep and interesting, making unique use of both of the DS screens at once. Principally, you battle monsters known as the 'Noise'. Neku and Shinki are controlled simultaneously, one on each of the two screens. Neku is controlled with the stylus on the touchscreen, different gestures executing different types of attacks (known as 'Psychs') depending on which badges (the physical metaphor for moves) are equipped. The second character is controlled on the top screen using the D-pad, combination buttons dictating which moves she performs.

Initially, it appears as though the game is asking too much of its player. Controlling two characters in parallel across two different screens with two different control mechanisms is a tall order, but in time it becomes manageable and then enjoyable. Enemies drop badges which can be

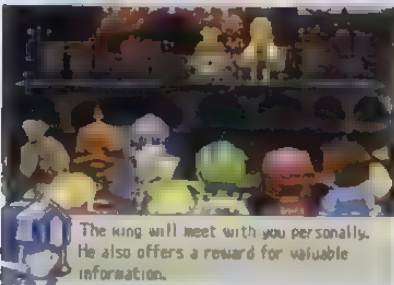


Predictably, the game retains many of the RPG elements that its developer is best known for. In particular, the many different costumes and accessories that can be purchased from Shibuya's stores are a pleasure to collect.

equipped to open up the move roster and, because both badges and characters earn experience separately, it's possible to customise your team right from the start. As each enemy encounter is rated in a *Viewtiful Joe* style, the emphasis is on showboating through customisation, meaning the game is deeper than it is wide. However, with a slew of different moves to discover and evolve, a fresh and exciting new way of framing an interactive challenge and an interesting story tied to a single small location, these are depths well worth exploring. [8]



It's possible to 'paint' moogles you've found using an in-built editor. This allows you to change the look of everything from the colour of the moogles' pom-pom to its facial layout. The game encourages the trading of these pimped out moogles via Mog Trader, another indication of the target age group.



The king will meet with you personally. He also offers a reward for valuable information.

In multiplayer it's possible to play in a 'Free' mode, where fields unlocked in singleplayer are available to explore as a group, or in 'Quest' mode, where the king issues missions.



Throughout the game you'll encounter moogles. When approached, they will issue you with a stamp. Collect enough and you'll unlock a simple racing game.

FINAL FANTASY CRYSTAL CHRONICLES: RING OF FATES

DS RELEASE DATE

PRODUCED BY SQUARE ENIX, DEVELOPED BY TAITO

The original *Crystal Chronicles* might have been a lively attempt to encourage fans of multiplayer RPGs to meet around a single television screen but it was also a failed one. The high entry fee of a Game Boy Advance and link cable per player (the handheld acting as a controller linked to the GameCube) combined with some awkward mechanics effortlessly outshone by rival *Four Swords* ensured the game wasn't worth the effort for any but the most ardent (and blinkered) *Final Fantasy* devotees.

Sequel *Ring Of Fates* arrives without quite the same pioneering spirit, now confined to a single piece of hardware and boasting distinct singleplayer and multiplayer modes requiring separate characters. Despite the more traditional approach it's a welcome addition to a Nintendo DS library inexplicably starved of such games, even if the multi-cart requirement and lack of online link-up ensure the barrier to multiplayer entry is higher than it should be.

The *Final Fantasy* moniker is misleading. This is an isometric 3D action game whose key-finding dungeon puzzles bring the game's mechanics closer to *Legend Of Zelda* territory than that of the mainline series from which it borrows a name. The liberation doesn't extend to the game's premise, which once again focuses on

crystals – the weak and shallow thematic crutch that even the most devoted Square Enix fan must have tired of. Focusing on two young twins, Yuri and Chelinka, players are tasked with protecting their world by uncovering the secrets of a Great Crystal, a cookie-cutter story retold here for a young audience.

Play is divided between town and dungeon locations, once discovered are selected from a list rather than an overworld map, and this decision makes the game-world feel small for the genre. Towns are uninteresting and sparsely populated places which act almost exclusively as locations to upgrade armour, weapons and statistics, buy spells and materials and forge items. Dungeons, by contrast, are complex, multi-tiered rabbit warrens filled with enemies, treasure chests and, at their heart, a boss encounter.

Combat in those dungeons has been compromised by the effectiveness of button mashing to hack through the cutesy enemies, which mostly nullifies a nuanced battle system. However, with the touchscreen acting as a live menu, it's quick and easy to switch between spell types, potions, and even characters, in the midst of battle. Rudimentary puzzles require you to cast various spells on different coloured dates or to hit a key to progress, but the



In addition to a straightforward hacking attack, you also have a jump attack, a throw, a downward thrust and a hanging attack, whereby you can hold on to flying enemies to strike them from below. It serves to add a little variety to the game's button mashing.

dungeon design and progression curve is relatively safe and lightweight.

Ultimately, *Ring Of Fates* is only superficially similar to *Zelda*: there's no real augmentation of abilities or tools, and boss fights require little thought or strategy save for straightforward hit point management and the result fails to stretch even the younger demographic it's aimed at. In quests played with up to three friends the experience improves, but the game does nothing clever, original or compelling enough to recommend a questing over MMOs [6]

A tribe called quest



Characters are split between four distinct-looking tribes, the Clavats, Lityts, Yukes and Selkies. As the game progresses you gain the ability to switch between characters from each tribe, granting access to four unique tribal abilities. Clavats produce a powerful lunging attack while Yukes must be used to solve some dungeon puzzles by drawing a line of 'magic thread' from the character to the object you wish to make visible or activate. Selkies can fire a volley of arrows on a single target while Lityts can summon a barrel-like urn to roll around in both to inflict damage on opponents or to reach otherwise inaccessible places.

MYSTERY DUNGEON: SHIREN THE WANDERER

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: CHUNSOFT



Each time you make an attempt on the Land of the Golden Condor, you'll meet different NPCs who provide various side quests from both towns and dungeon floors. Their presence enriches sparse, lonely dungeon hacking into simple but nuanced and surprising encounters. One such exchange is with a woman who promises to give you a surprise but, if you let her, blinds you for several turns. She reappears on a subsequent playthrough, claiming that it was actually her sister who did it, before blinding you once more. But on the next you find her being attacked by two men that she's also tricked. Choose to help her by fighting the men and she'll join your party, increasing your chances of survival given her fighting strength and ability to blind enemies.

Ignore the score. *Shiren The Wanderer* is a faithful remake of a Japan-only *Rogue*-like RPG released for the SNE5 in 1995. As such, it's an anachronistic, unforwinq instalment of a game form that has long since been left behind by mainstream gaming. But that doesn't mean that it can't provide a thoroughly rewarding experience, despite how harrowingly unfair and unsuited to a handheld console it is.

Set in a fantasy feudal Japan, the game features a turn-based journey through 30 randomly-generated floors to find the Land of the Golden Condor. Every few floors there is a rest area with shops, inns, store houses and other resources, but die at any point and you'll be returned to the starting town and level one, having lost your money and any items you haven't managed to stockpile in the store house. It's relatively standard *Rogue*-like fare, but for DS owners used to Nintendo's friendly approach to game design, it will seem unnecessarily painful.

But for those willing to persevere, it can provide some of the most powerful moments in gaming, because death is not just some throwaway inconvenience, and your destiny is in the hands of fate. You'll begin floors surrounded by monsters, or walk into traps that leave you helplessly confused. You'll be blinded by apparently friendly women permanently weakened by a masseur who promises to make you feel better and



punched in the back by a feckless party member during battle. You'll fail to find a single weapon for ten floors and starve because you can't find food. You'll die time and again, because the game doesn't seem to care about you. But, as frustrating as that might sound, the stories of your quests are deeply meaningful because you're not on some game designer's prescribed rollercoaster but your own personal journey on which, whether you succeed or fail, it's how you deal with outrageous fortune that matters.

If there's one thing that properly explains *Shiren The Wanderer*'s intricacies, it's located in the starting town. Fei's Problems is a series of 50 one-floor challenges that exposes its basic mechanics as a complex strategy-based puzzle game. It acts as a tutorial in the capabilities of its many items, including staves, which can do things like switch Shiren's position with enemies or knock them back, scrolls that activate area-based magic and jars, of which there are a bewildering number of types, including those that identify or steal items, send them to the store house, or combine weapons. Understanding their uses and the way traps and enemies behave is essential to survival, and beating each level wins you a random item that could see you start with luck on your side.

Each successive playthrough sees you improving and stockpiling better weapons and items and progressing through the side-quests, which add things like shortcut routes, party members and new food sources to the game-world, and slowly your chance of getting further increase. And, though Shiren

Table Mountain



Enemy design is varied and imaginative: for instance, when killed, Evil Soldiers resurrect as a ghost that attacks other enemies to level up into a terrifying opponent.

always returns to level one, your own knowledge can only grow.

Yes, this is a barely updated version of an old game and, given its convoluted save system, it's not ideal for playing on the go. Yes, it's a simplified re-reading of games from *NetHack* to *Angband*. Yet *Shiren The Wanderer* still has its own charm and deep and lasting individual value that, for all its abstract irritations, surpasses many more modern gaming experiences. [6]



Understanding what items do is crucial to progress, especially given the fact that they're so randomly doled out - you'll have to muddle through with what you've got.



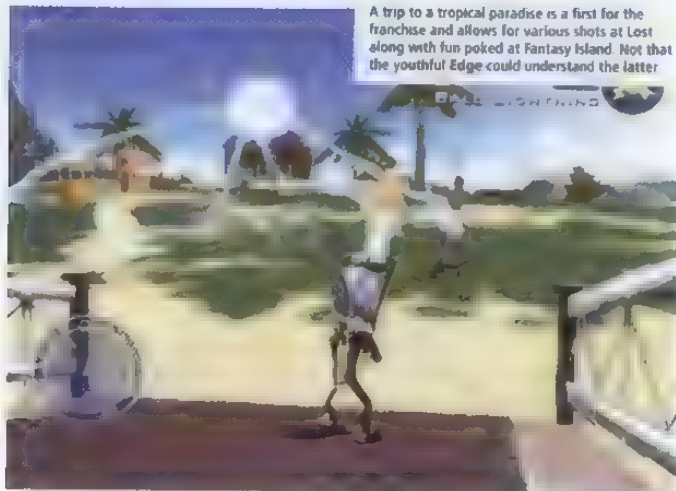
For all that they're tile-based simple layouts of rooms and corridors, and, apart from certain dungeon walls being breakable with the pickaxe, entirely uninteractive, environments are varied, depicting bamboo forests, mountain passes and rocky caves. The variety helps reinforce the sense that you're on a meaningful journey.



DESTROY ALL HUMANS: BIG WILLY UNLEASHED

FORMAT: Wii RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: LOCOMOTIVE

A trip to a tropical paradise is a first for the franchise and allows for various shots at *Lost* along with fun pokes at *Fantasy Island*. Not that the youthful Edge could understand the latter



Big *Willy Unleashed* is something of an alien abduction itself, hoisted from series originators Pandemic and offered to Locomotive for Wii Remote probing. But where Pandemic merged tongue-in-cheek B-movie sensibilities with the sandbox chaos of its other big hitter, *Mercenaries: Playground Of Destruction*, Locomotive offers only playground humour and mild chaos.

Wandering the smallest of sandbox environments, it's a mystery of Area 51 proportions as to why the basic game-world stutters and coughs while its PS2 predecessors see shinier universes running with greater consistency. A smattering of physics allows Crypto to bowl civilians, Corvettes and cows with great abandon, but the strikes with these colourful projectiles are undermined by the crude cereal box cities offered up as pins.

And while Crypto's delightfully nasty arsenal of Mars Attacks-aping d-sintegration guns and electro rays are easily aimed with the Remote pointer, the various Remote twisting schemes designed to pilot saucer and the *Godzilla*-like Big Willy himself render the main destructive pull as a wonky distraction. It's a shame, as the sight of a press junket turned into a flaming skeleton convention at the press of a button still elicits a cruel smirk.

Mission design feels particularly lazy this time round, Locomotive



The zombie gun is new, but turning enemies into brain-munching, fly-attracting allies negates much of the challenge. It brings the brain-dead to *Big Willy Unleashed* in more ways than one

seemingly jotting down amusing cutscene scenarios before finding tenuous ways of tying 'destroy this' or 'abduct that' tasks to the constant stream of ooh-er references to 'big willies' and 'meat' in the dialogue. Indeed, so dedicated to obscene verb usage are these double entendre-addicts that it's entirely possible to reach the mission itself without any real idea of the task at hand.

And yet amongst the hundreds of orders to beat, bend, spread and probe there sits a jarring vein of knowing references to Paul Simon, Patty Hearst and the state of Paul Michael Glaser's bouffant hairdo. Just who is *Big Willy Unleashed* aimed at, the children of the '70s or the LOL-ing Xbox generation? And, more importantly, how do either demographic explain away the bland favour of *Destroy All Humans* circa 2005 tasted in every nook of Crypto's meat. Oh-er. [4]



INSECTICIDE

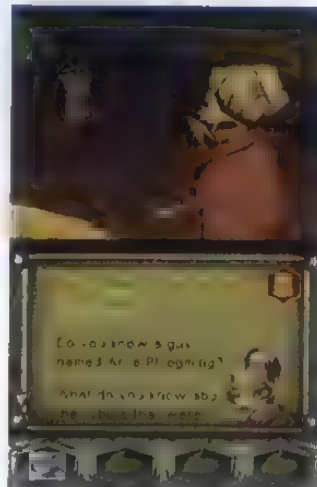
FORMAT: DS (VERSION TESTED), PC RELEASE: NOW (US) TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: GAMECOCK DEVELOPER: CRACKPOT

I can't find anybody to hardcore with me." So reads one of Gamecock's many tongue-in-cheek PR T-shirt slogans. Joke is, on the strength of *Insecticide* it's hard to see why anyone would want to. Distinctly Pixar-like in tone, Crackpot pitches the insect world as seen through the lens of a film noir director.

The strength of such an endeavour depends largely on the writers' ability to find humorous parallels between the bugs' world and ours. But outside of a few silly pokes at worker drone mentality – the bee workers spout fizzy-drink-endorsing PR patter – much of the world seems forced. The hierarchy of a hive is ripe for nefarious power plays, so why does the tale focus on cloning and arms deals?

And apparently we missed the *Natural World* episode in which insects gave up their dazzling architecture for cowering warehouses and ugly polygonal city blocks. With buggy collision detection and platform-obscuring gloom hanging over the city, scuttling around as agent Chris Liszt is difficult enough without the lack of memorable level geography. This is the kind of boil-in-the-bag platforming that even licensed children's fare is beginning to balk at.

More interesting are brief forays into CSI sleuthing. Although these point and click segments are always welcomed – it's a genre horribly under-represented on DS – these moments are entirely throwaway, five or so obvious interactions and you're on to the next platforming trudge. Puzzles



Shady dealings in the Queen Bee's Nectarola Corporation form the narrative backbone of the initial case, but a shift into sci-fi territory at the 11th hour undoes any of the private eye goodwill

are of the 'give doughnut to the doughnut-desiring character' variety, rarely extending beyond chores.

Played out to a woozy jazz beat, it's reminiscent of *Grim Fandango*, but comparisons end there, the wit and charm of Lucasarts' journey through the underworld sorely missed. The link also reminds that *Insecticide* is heading to the PC. Indeed, with the DS version's rather jarring mix of FMV cutscenes and static storyboards we wonder if it is the victim of a hurried handheld abridging.

The jury's out on *Insecticide*'s PC future, but a quick blast of critical Raid should purge this DS infestation. [3]



Liszt's arsenal is particularly flimsy, a range of increasingly dangerous-looking cannons that all seem to fire green splodges that may or may not connect. Later meddling with telekinesis alters splodge colour, but the ineffectualness continues



ECO CREATURES: SAVE THE FOREST

FORUMS: WWW.GAMERSPOT.COM/SHIN/EN

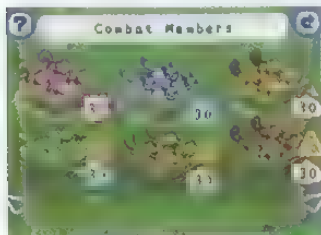


Despite being a giant of some kind, your character dies easily, entailing a long trek back from your respawn point. Inevitably, and irritatingly, your army has since dispersed

Squirrels are the last defence against the encroaching evil of industrialisation. That's pretty much the extent of the ecologically-sensitive message put forward by *Eco Creatures*, an almost obscenely cute RTS sponsored by none other than the World Wide Fund for Nature. *Eco Creatures* environmental awareness operates on a slightly lower level of subtlety than *Captain Planet*, which would be fine if the game promised to be accessible enough that the WWF could 'get 'em while they're young. Unfortunately, while the affable pineapple-shaped protagonist and his ability to command armies of woodland creatures would seem to tick the right boxes for a children's title, *Eco Creatures* conceals a chaotic mush of design ideas, placed at the mercy of a dire control scheme. Painfully, the game's ideas and

methods of execution are unintuitive enough that you are forced to play through the tutorials, but simple enough that they are tedious and immensely patronising. And knowing the controls is only half the battle – employing them with any degree of effect is another matter entirely. The wrong units are frequently selected, or not at all – and when your stylus movement interferes with bits of scenery or dares to go near the buttons at the side of the screen menus pop up unbidden and accidental orders are made. Such annoyances are aggravated still by the limited area view and the fact that your skittish forest friends will lose interest after a matter of seconds and wander off. Although there are minor environmental puzzles, the major challenge is simply in chaperoning these dumb animals from one area of the map to another – which is frankly an irritation the RTS did not need.

Outside of the actual missions *Eco Creatures* has some interesting ideas regarding levelling up and arranging your army, but this hat-tip to nuance is undermined by the fact that the actual gameplay is just muddlesome, frustrating and otherwise devoid of depth. It all feels like a bit of a hassle, and that, presumably, is not the message the WWF would like to convey about saving the environment. [4]

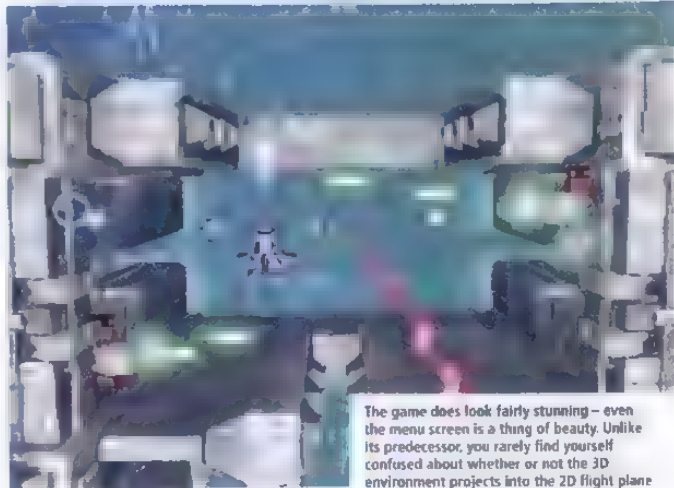


As in nature, blue squirrels can fly and transport other units and objects. But selecting them and holding their interest long enough to accomplish such a goal is far more arduous than it needs to be.



NANOSTRAY 2

FORUMS: WWW.GAMERSPOT.COM/SHIN/EN



The game does look fairly stunning – even the menu screen is a thing of beauty. Unlike its predecessor, you rarely find yourself confused about whether or not the 3D environment projects into the 2D flight plane

There have been conspicuously few side-scrolling shooters for the DS. Perhaps this is because potential developers played *Nanostray* and concluded that the combination of stylus and genre was a poor match, with that game, the fact that your hand partially obscured the screen at times made split-second spaceship dog-fighting slightly tricky. *Nanostray 2* appears to come to the same conclusion, and relegates the stylus to menu screens only.

Sporting this more conservative control scheme, *Nanostray 2* has shifted its sense of novelty to the weapon load-out. Again, there are several weapons to choose from – but these only affect your alternate fire. Your primary can't be swapped out, but is actually the most versatile element of your armoury. After gunning down the first two waves of enemies, you power up your primary fire to include two satellite weapons that shoot projectiles in a direction of your choosing. On the equipment screen, you decide their placement around your ship and their angle – in fact, you define three separate stances for them, which you can cycle through during the mission with the bumpers. It sounds like inconsequential fiddling, but it becomes a vital part of play and several missions force you to think carefully about the best arrangement.

The eight missions are lively, lengthy and thoroughly unforgetting – a

mixture of environmental hazards and combat with a time-based chaining system for the score-attack maniacs out there. Progress is divided into tiers, but completion of the first means nothing if you end up at the game-over screen later on – you still go back to the start. *Nanostray 2* makes few concessions to the casual gamer.

Nonetheless, aside from the occasional hiccup with collision detection, and some uninspired boss battles, *Nanostray 2* does enough to gain an honourable mention in the genre, even if competition on its platform of choice is rather sparse. [7]



Aside from the campaign, there are 32 challenge missions which unlock minigames – bland clones of *Breakout* and the like. Despite a limp reward, the challenges themselves are craftily conceived.



DEMENTIUM: THE WARD

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (USA, APRIL (EUROPE))
PUBLISHER: GAMECOCK DEVELOPER: BEMEGADE KID
PREVIOUSLY WE TESTED

By asking us to choose between holding a flashlight and a gun, *Doom 3* created an effective means of building tension and, simultaneously, insulted the player with contrivance. *Dementium: The Ward* gives you the exact same decision but, unfortunately demonstrates with much greater efficiency just how easy it is to expend the player's goodwill.

Dementium is set in a derelict asylum overrun by the corrupt minions of videogame horror cliché and strewn with the corpses of helpful graffiti artists who chose to spend the final agonising seconds of their life scrawling key-codes in their own blood. The world's atmosphere, with its grimy corridors illuminated only by the flickering bulb of your torch, echoing with a soundtrack of a arms radio static, rain and ghoulish burbling. Then you encounter the same bleak non-interactive hallways again and again, each punctuated by obvious monster closets.

The re-use of assets is perhaps credible, hospitals are confusingly uniform in their design, after all - but clearly this can make them boring locations for games to take place. A good and grisly haunting should make things more interesting but, in



This chubby fellow, The Cleaver, represents the game's first abrupt difficulty spike as well as being a particularly poor boss battle. Thankfully, the UK version revamps the original US version's punishingly wide spaced save points.

Dementium's case, this amounts to blasting the same creatures every few yards. Soon you end up running past most of the enemies because they are too dull to fight - or at least you try the required double tap on the E-load stick and even then your run speed is barely more than a gait trot.

There are nice touches - cockroaches that scatter under your flashlight, the occasional puzzle effective cutscenes - but there's little that you won't have found implemented in a vastly more satisfactory form elsewhere. Gruesome horror shooters are a novelty on the DS but a paucity of competing titles does not make *Dementium* offering any better. [5]



Slugs (above left) emerge out of grates, mowl-like babies and fail to stick convincingly to ceilings or walls. You can't even club them to death, as you appear unable to swing your baton below your own knee level.



ROCKETMEN: AXIS OF EVIL

FORMAT: XBOX 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: ACRONYM GAMES



The RPG-style upgrading is surprisingly intricate, governing armour, stats and both primary and secondary weapons. The surprise, however, comes mostly from how little you feel it affects your in-game potency.

Rocketmen: Axis Of Evil is a twin-stick shooter that means to be messy. Your basic weapon is weedy to the point of worthlessness, forcing you to depend on regular gun pickups, dropped by destroyed foes and objects. Often the camera strays at its own fixed pace, meaning that thorough sweeps are off the menu and, apart from the occasional fork, so's exploration. Enemies tend to fire predictably, zapping at where they expect you to be rather than where you actually are, so any clean circling-strating/shepherding is replaced by a speedy crossfire that makes remaining unharmed a pipe dream.

Such chaos would be fine, but *Rocketmen*'s stat-up is, indeed,

To its credit, the screen brims with alien opposition, ordnance and destructible props, but you're ultimately left feeling chagrined rather than charged. Frantic crowd-control action wouldn't feel so devoid if the crowds themselves weren't so relentless, diffuse and joyless to defeat and so sloppy to control. And such confrontation has no choice but to take centre stage, since level design is at a minimum. Take the third stage: an overlong trudge through a repeating series of walkways and corridors with the occasional switch activation to further progress and only the droves of enemies to keep you awake. Even when it changes pace, with a jetpack section or a hovercraft ride, not principles still dominate, and defeat.

Four-strong multiplayer blows away some of the dust, but there's little room for co-ordination in terms of social shootouts; other people are there to detract from the one-note fray rather than rev up the party. It's a shame, given that the game's engine is capable of hefting so much around, its cleanly colourful cod sci-fi style (jarring cutscenes aside) is close to feeling vivacious, and pick-ups and loot drops are easy to spot in the midst of the commotion. Given *Rocketmen*'s focus, you can overlook it lacking the keenness and elegance that made *Dark Mist* such a success. That it feels so barren despite its busyness, and fails to ignite despite all its gunpowder, is impossible to ignore. [4]



The score multiplier remains in effect until you take damage. Initially it seems like a kinder way of doing things than having it degrade through inactivity, but given the hectic nature of the game it feels like the wrong decision.

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You may have heard that EA has a studio in Vancouver – the largest in the world, no less – but the presence of a voracious, sprawling, thriving development community has remained

enthusiastic gamers who take an interest in what

clashes and download interviews with producers –

might be surprised at how many top-tier titles have emerged from British Columbia's largest city.

scandinavia, Germany, Britain or Quebec and it's immediately clear where they're from, not just

identity subtly but tangibly branded on it, however artificial that may be. By contrast, Vancouver is so

easy (and possibly misleading) labels are difficult to attribute.

defining quality, even if it's a tricky one to sell. But if Vancouver has been somewhat quiet in terms of self-promotion so far, this is all about to change. So rapidly has the industry grown here that it's on the brink of achieving critical mass.

If the Vancouver message has left the development community in a state of high talent, necessitating a significant influx of talent from the area as a whole. With this

get out to British Columbia to see what lies ahead for its contribution to the industry, and how it will make itself heard.



SIX STUDIOS TALK PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



GAME DEVELOPER DIRECTORY



THE BEST OF THE REST IN THE REGION



STUDIO PROFILE

THREEWAVE SOFTWARE



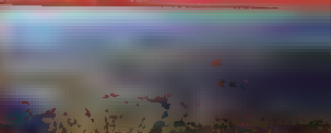
STUDIO PROFILE: BLUE CASTLE GAMES



STUDIO PROFILE: THREEWAVE SOFTWARE



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THE BEST OF THE REST IN THE REGION



WEST COAST

With Vancouver's game industry mid-boom, never has the dev scene's stock been so high and its talent supply so stretched. We ask six very different studios what life is like in this remarkable community



EXPRESS

Big and small, independent and not, casual and hardcore — Vancouver has given birth to a plethora of game development studios operating at all levels of the industry. And, unlike so many hi-tech business clusters, it has not been the product of governmental schemes offering investments or tax breaks. In fact, it's only now that the provincial government is realizing the significance of the game industry in the area. Action Pants Inc. kindly let us into their HQ so we could meet with 11 prominent people working in or with the industry to find out just how the community has quietly managed to grow and just where the risks lie going next.

Why has Vancouver been able to create this hub of game developers?

Omar Al-Khafaji: Two words, mate. Electronic Arts. A brief history: then Don Matrick started a company called Distinctive Software Inc. and Electronic Arts bought them... when was that? ... in 1997. And that studio grew and grew and gave birth to a homegrown industry in Vancouver. From there, we've spawned off into myriad studios.

Kathy Gibson: We also have the film industry to lend itself to the creative forces in Vancouver. That's a big part of it. We're sort of an extension of the film industry.

Jonathan Dowdeswell: I think that the association with the film industry has been a huge thing. Vancouver has been a major centre for film development for a long, long time and because of that there have been an incredible number of creative people who have come up here. Then it was really easy for them to make the transition to games. It engaged the entire culture here and the industry blossomed.

Rob McMurtry: The next-gen systems helped with getting the film industry onboard as well. Because they no longer have to make the quality compromises that they would have had to make in the past.

Is there something particular about Vancouver as a city that nurtures creative industries?

Nik Palmer: The actual environment itself fits really well with the demographic of developers. It just happens to be a place where you can go and go snowboarding, lie on the beach or go volleyball. There's a lot of different things to draw people here. You only have to walk around for ten minutes a day like today to see why EA started the ball rolling. A lot of people come here on vacation for a long weekend or a week and say, "Wow, that's where I want to be."

Leah Rubin: We also have a very liberal political environment here. Gay marriage is legal, it's basically equal here, so it kind of inspires a creative mindset. [Laughter] No, it does. Economically it's true. **Kraig Docherty:** And it continually comes up in surveys as one of the top cities to live in. Quality of life is brought up consistently in magazine articles and various reputable sources.

Hamish Millar: Electronic Arts and the quality of life were the two reasons why I chose to move here. I was looking to break into the games industry. I knew that the biggest studio in the world operated out of Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, and I had



consistently seen Vancouver in the top four cities to live. It was a no-brainer.

Dan Irish: I think the thing for me was that I spent the first ten years of my career in San Francisco. And when I first visited Vancouver in 2001 this beautiful city paralleled a lot of the culture you found in San Francisco ten years earlier, right? So for me, I could see how the city evolved, how the culture evolved and how the value of the different companies in San Francisco had evolved, and I could kind of forecast where the industry in Vancouver was going.

Sheri Kashman: It's also relatively easy to get here from an immigration perspective, compared to the US. We've had no significant problems bringing people over.

Kathy Gibson: I think the teams at our respective studios have become so multicultural over time because of Vancouver's strong appeal that it kind of perpetuates itself in terms of the kind of people we can hire over. So you have people from Scotland, Romania, Mexico, Australia and all over, and they all have their own perspectives which they bring to the table. It makes the whole game experience, and work experience, that much richer.

Leah Rubin: There's also an affinity with people who live in the UK. I think they are quite well-disposed towards coming to Canada, and Vancouver's the city of choice. It makes the transition very simple. I mean, we share a queen.



Omar Al-Khafaji And that takes us back to that liberal society

Does such multiculturalism preclude the possibility of a distinctly Vancouverite identity emerging? Quebec has its own very distinctive Gallic culture.

Jonathan Dowdeswell: That's a good question you're sort of getting to the roots of Vancouver's identity itself. As a city, it doesn't even really have a Vancouver thing – there's been such rapid growth over the last 25 years, with an influx of people from many different cultures. It'll probably be another 20 years before that starts to form and gel into cohesion. Right now it's just a really cool place with lots of interesting people from all over the world.

Leah Rubin: That said, there's still a West Coast vibe that is unique – and Quebec wouldn't have that. **Kraig Docherty:** The 2010 [Winter] Olympics coming here will compound that. For those that don't know Vancouver already and have never had a nice view of it, the Olympics will create further awareness and give the city a further dose of multiculturalism than it has already experienced.

Hamish Millar: I'm part of the SIGGRAPH chapter here, and we've secured the conference here for 2011 – and that's 25,000 people coming from the tech industries. Seeing what will happen in the wake of that will be pretty exciting.

"That's what we need, a game that pinpoints us and has people saying, 'That came out of Vancouver!'"

Nik Palmer, Action Pants Inc

To make another comparison with the Quebec development scene, Assassin's Creed is fairly well known to have been developed in Montreal. Do you think there's a real awareness outside of Vancouver that your studios are based here?

Nik Palmer: We were talking at our [at] just this morning. What we're missing here is the Brad Pitt of the games industry, we're missing the one thing that puts us on the map. That's not to say we haven't made some really great games here, but we're missing the game that scores 95 per cent plus and sells two to three million copies. That's what we need, a game that pinpoints us and has people saying, "That came out of Vancouver." The effect that would have on all our games would be outstanding, not just because people would think about our games a lot more but because we would attract even more talent here.

Rob McMurtry: That's a big part of the question about Vancouver's style. It might take 20 years to

develop or someone might suddenly come up with that hit, that particular innovation that says, "this is what developers are doing in Vancouver." The one thing we can leverage is quality. If everybody as a community is developing really good games then publishers are going to promote Vancouver. **Omar Al-Khafaji:** I wonder whether the style of Vancouver might be a style of process, it's how we go about doing things. Because that's the sort of thing that Vancouver's culture is really into, a certain laid back attitude. How things are dealt with internally here is quite possibly different to how things would be at a similar studio in Montreal or San Francisco. **Dan Irish:** I also think that. For example, Threewave was built by people who had worked together before – and the message I continually give our teams is that they're not really working for me or Threewave but for each other and the team, they're going to go on to the next project and they'll want the very best working with them so there's no reason to give anything less than their best, because they're going to be the people who are remembered and recognised as being able to reach that goal of excellence.

Sheri Kashman: It's all about the team. People live and die by the team.

Kathy Gibson: Peer relations are a huge driving force here. People go to work because they are excited to work with the guy next to them and learn from them. That whole mentorship spirals. We're about building a

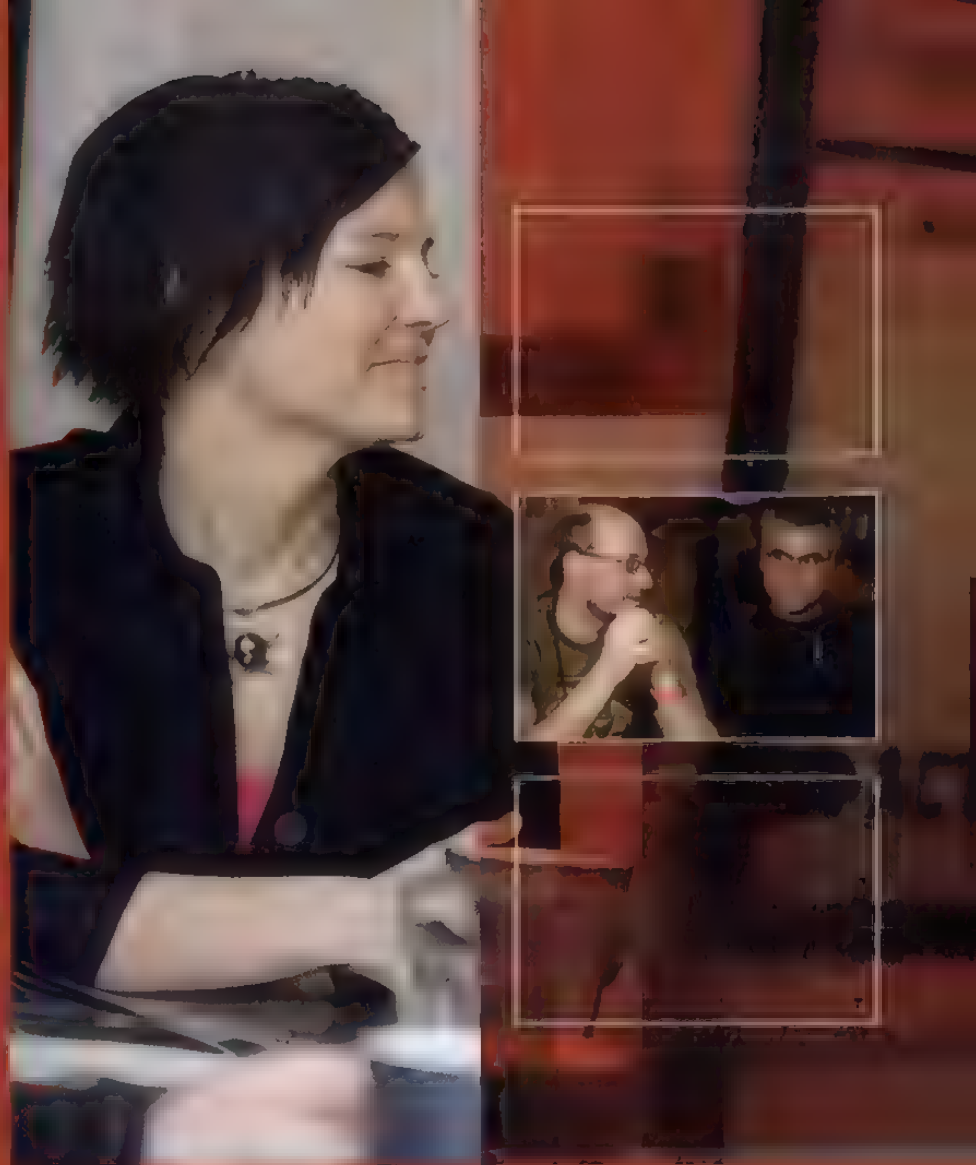
mid-to-senior level talent from Europe, South America, Asia and all over, and those individuals are training up our juniors, who we are able to hire locally.

And is there enough local talent?

[Nervous laughter]

Jonathan Dowdeswell: It's stretched a little thin. There are a number of schools that have started training artists – designers and programmers, audio people as well, and producers. So that's good. I think all the studios in this room have some sort of relationship with a number of those schools, and we can give them advice and make sure the students coming out are good. But it's definitely tight.

Omar Al-Khafaji: Immigration's a big part of the recruitment process. If you have a studio in Europe, essentially the population density is massive in comparison to where we are right now. The next town is that way, about 1000km away – and it's not even that big a place. So we have these little pockets of population, and with the speed the industry's growing we just can't expect all of our recruitment



"It's all about the team. People live and die by the team."

**Sheri Kashman,
Backbone Entertainment**

needs to be fulfilled by Vancouver. There's simply not enough people in the area.

Kathy Gibson: We're all feeling it's becoming increasingly difficult to find talent.

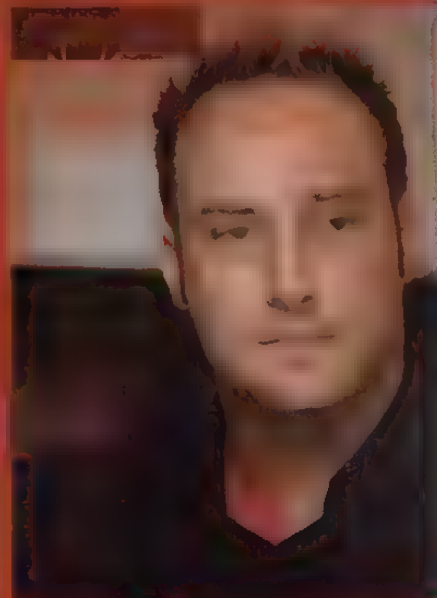
Leah Rubin: We're all cannibalising each other.

Kathy Gibson: I'll be honest – of my last five hires to junior were foreign workers and one was a junior. All of those to junior were foreign workers, three of them were already living here. I think we all try to have some nicety in terms of not being aggressive towards each other, but when an employee goes to look we're quick to grab them if they're good and they're going to fit the team.

Nik Palmer: Again, I think if in the next three to five years the one killer product comes out of here, then it'll redefine the density of our studio population.

Kathy Gibson: I hear banter about other organisations setting up base in Vancouver – studios looking to hire 200 to 300 people – where are they coming from? Because we're not finding them here and we're all feeling that.

Sheri Kashman: The reality is that our gain is somebody else's loss. That's what's happening now. I



don't want to use the word poaching, because that's not what we're meaning to do, but the reality is that if someone's coming to Backbone they've left one of these guys' studios, and vice versa.

Kraig Docherty: Touching the immigration point, that itself is becoming more and more of a challenge. Look at all the little nuances and clauses regarding specific types of visas, the job positions within those – limitations are completely outdated – literally ten years old! We're having to be really creative about how we get candidates through – I'm sure that's true for everyone around the table.

Kathy Gibson: I can definitely say that Kraig is on the money there. There hasn't been a push to update the criteria or create flexibility within the guidelines for getting people into the country.

Sheri Kashman: We're also using smoke and mirrors to get through the borders. We've got five to ten classifications to fit people into – if I want to bring an art director over rather than a senior animations effects editor, what difference does it make?

Nik Palmer: It's something that definitely needs to change.



Maureen O'Reilly: The immigration classifications are outdated – but then I don't know if a classification model could ever keep up with the changes that are going on within the games industry.

Hamish Millar: The positive side of this is that if you are talented and working for a good studio they go to extreme lengths to look after you.

Omar Al-Khafaji: Without immigration there is no growth. There's a massive risk associated with flying someone and their family over and getting them through the immigration system, just as part of the process of assessing whether you think they might be the right person. We've invested tens of thousands to fly them in, put them up in hotels, get them a car. That's a huge risk. The government needs to do their bit to make it easier. Remember that the candidate demographic is well-educated, experienced, young, vibrant, enthusiastic – exactly the sort of people Canada needs for its own future, let alone our own industry as a microcosm of the country as a whole.

What is the government currently doing?

Kathy Gibson: The temporary foreign workers unit



has been helpful. I'd say that's the one saving grace right now. The frustration we're all having is that the entire of the Citizenship and Immigration Canada is having a labour shortage – so are we, and so is British Columbia. It's really quite serious.

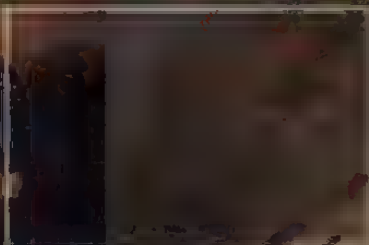
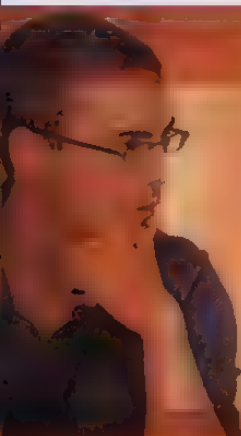
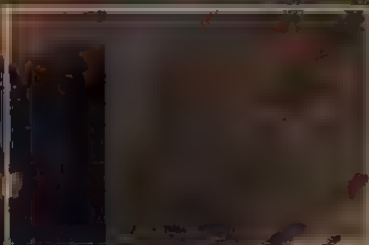
Jonathan Dowdeswell: Some of the other provinces have started really great programmes that will help investors to start games companies. They get rebates back on staff. Quebec has had it for a long time. And in the long term that's a great thing for us because, for all the reasons that Vancouver is such a beautiful place to be, some of those people will be attracted here. Once those industries start to establish themselves, we'll get more recognition in games as an industry Canada-wide and anyone who gets desirous of the West Coast vibe will head out here hopefully avoiding those border issues. So, ten years out, there are positive things.

So game developers don't see any tax breaks in British Columbia?

Leah Rubin: There are some provinces that get favourable treatment – and then there's BC.

Omar Al-Khafaji: There's two distinct layers of government – there's the federal government, which concerns all of Canada and then there's the provincial government. And there's a lot of money flowing from the various levels of government but each province deals with industry in its own way – so Quebec gets a lot of incentives and BC doesn't.

Maureen O'Reilly: Unfortunately, there's an education process that's needed here. There's just not the awareness of how fast and how important the games industry is. The film and television industries are very well represented and they tend to go political when there's an issue, as do a lot of industries outside the entertainment raft – farmers when they've been hit with the blight, loggers and pine people. All of



these groups are very, very vocal. One of the things I've noticed about the games industry is that it's much more focussed on its own business – I haven't seen a great deal of strong advocacy at a political level. But the problem for Vancouver is, if they don't go political, they will eventually just go

Rob McMurtry: I think the industry values its independence and its rebel image. On the one hand we try to disassociate ourselves with the 18-25 year old males, and on the other hand grandma's playing Wii. That's not hip and edgy. So we have this sort of identity complex. How many individual game developers are there on the mainland? 4000 or so? But where's the organization, where's the voice of all those people? One of the reasons EA has spun off so many start-ups is that people want to have control over their own destiny and be independent. And so, given that there's this culture of independence, one of the last things people want is more government in their lives. And it's not that the government is negative – it's just that we already put 100 per cent of our effort into getting the people we need and the games that we make, and it's hard to take even five

or ten per cent of that effort and devote it to pursuing subsidisation or other things to change the business climate.

Nik Palmer: I was watching TV the other day and saw the new *Turok* marketing campaign. It's great – a new development studio, a new game out the door but it would be nice if it said "Made in Vancouver". I think we can do a lot more ourselves like that to educate people about the industry here.

What's the Vancouver development scene going to look like five years down the line?

Dan Irish: There's a parallel between what we're seeing here now and San Fran during the emerging CD-ROM media days, where you have this merging of talent and opportunity and an expanding market. And from the companies that were grown in the San Francisco Bay area you see that many people went on to found new things like Hotmail or head up new initiatives at Apple or Electronic Arts. Certainly Nolan Bushnell, Steve Jobs and Xerox PARC didn't happen by accident. It was really that convergence in Silicon Valley that spawned not just videogames but the

whole technology sector – and in Apple's case, a whole new market for music that didn't exist before. And I think Canada, and certainly British Columbia has that opportunity too – it just needs to be realised. We need the right talent here that's innovative, experienced, enthusiastic and entrepreneurial to make this happen.

Leah Rubin: The West Coast is just ripe for this kind of thing – Silicon Valley, San Francisco and Vancouver – I mean, it's all still the Wild West, right?

Nik Palmer: I certainly don't think the industry here will stay the same. We have a giant in our midst, and it's changing week on week. We have an immense number of small studios here – and at some point that might have to change as well, simply for them to grow into medium-sized studios.

Rob McMurtry: I think there's going to be some consolidation. There are studios that have a lot of expertise in certain genres, and rather than grow internally to expand their market they'll just acquire one another. Try to band together so you can deal with big publishers. One company of 400 people is going to have way more opportunities than two



companies of 200. I think we're certain to see more freelancing in games too. Right now, freelancing in games isn't practical because you need to know these crazy toolsets – it takes you half the first cycle to learn it, the next cycle you get decent at it and the third cycle you get bored with it. In film, people don't have to figure out how to edit every time they move to a new company.

Omar Al-Khafaji: Or rebuild the camera.
Rob McMurtry: Right – so as the tools stabilise we'll begin to conform to that film model, with a more long-term core that represents each discipline and then a more fluid group of people who are going to come and go among the different companies to do specific things.

Omar Al-Khafaji: Again – no different from the film industry. All the way up to '50s it was all about the studio, as they were the only ones who had the resources to pull the project together.

Jonathan Dowdeswell: We've talked about that as well – that correlation between cameras and the tech we build. I'm not certain that there can be a standard, a tool set that can be so ubiquitous that we

"That's where we're at in the gaming industry: 'Wow! I can actually move the camera!'"

**Omar Al-Khafaji,
Action Pants Inc**



can achieve the unionised or freelanced mode but we will have a broader selection of tools that work better with each other, and we'll add our own innovation – like the first movie that did a steady cam shot, or the first movie that used green screen.

Nik Palmer: There are some standards. We all use first party SDKs – so maybe it's up to the likes of Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft to come in and invest more in the tools we use.

Omar Al-Khafaji: I don't want to overplay the analogy with film, but there was a time when an audience could walk into a theatre and watch things like a train going back and forth and donkeys on the beach – and that was utterly satisfying in itself. And that's where we're at in the gaming industry. "Wow! Look at this. I can actually move the camera!" I think what we're in the process of earning now is the language by which we use this as a mode of communication.

Jonathan Dowdeswell: I think one can't wait for *Donkeys On The Beach* in 3D. It's good to finally know what you're working on. Omar



DIRECTORY

THE NAMES AND GAMES OF VANCOUVER'S DEV SCENE

BRITISH COLUMBIA VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

A.C.R.O.N.Y.M. GAMES
www.acronymonline.com
Selected Softography:
Rocketmen. Axis Of Evil

ACTION PANTS INC.
www.actionpantsinc.com

ATOMIC ROBOT GAMES
www.atomicrobotgames.com

BACKBONE ENTERTAINMENT
www.backboneentertainment.com
1 Selected Softography:
Monster Lab, Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo HD, Commando 3

BACKLASH STUDIOS
www.backlashstudios.com
Selected Softography:
Project Terran

BLUE CASTLE GAMES INC.
www.bluecastlegames.com
Selected Softography:
The Bigs

CAKLEBERRIES ENTERTAINMENT
www.cackleberries.com
Selected Softography:
Oville

CLUB PENGUIN
www.play.clubpenguin.com
Selected Softography:
Club Penguin

DEEP FRIED ENTERTAINMENT INC.
www.deepfriedentertainment.com
Selected Softography:
Full Auto 2: Battlelines

ELECTRONIC ARTS
www.ea.com
2 Selected Softography:
FIFA 08, Skate,
3 *Need For Speed: ProStreet, Def Jam: Fight For New York*

ETHICAL ENTERTAINMENT
www.ethicalentertainment.com
Selected Softography:
Street Of Dreams

GEKIDO DESIGN GROUP INC.
www.gdgi.ca
Selected Softography:
Beyond Virtual Platform

GNOSIS GAMES
www.gnosisgames.com
Selected Softography:
CK's Candy Factory

HOTHEAD GAMES
www.hotheadgames.com
4 Selected Softography:
Penny Arcade Adventures

INTERSCAPE CREATIONS
www.icgame.net

IRONCLAD GAMES
www.ironcladgames.com
5 Selected Softography:
Sins Of A Solar Empire

IUGO MOBILE ENTERTAINMENT
www.iugome.com
Selected Softography:
Tiger Woods 07 (mobile)

JET BLACK GAMES
www.jetblackgames.com

KERBEROS PRODUCTIONS
www.kerberos-productions.com
Selected Softography:
Sword Of The Stars

KLEI ENTERTAINMENT
www.klei.com
6 Selected Softography:
N+

KOOLHAUS GAMES INC.
www.koolhausgames.com
Selected Softography:
Geometry Wars (mobile)

KRABBITSOFT STUDIOS INC.
www.krabbit.net
Selected Softography:
KrabbitWorld Labyrinth

MAGELLAN INTERACTIVE
www.magellaninteractive.com
Selected Softography:
Fullmetal Alchemist (card game)

MAID MARIAN ENTERTAINMENT
www.maidmarian.com
Selected Softography:
Sherwood Dungeon

NEXT LEVEL GAMES
www.nextlevelgames.com
7 Selected Softography:
Spiderman: Friend Or Foe, Mario Strikers Charged, Super Mario Strikers, NHL Hitz Pro

NINTENDO OF CANADA LTD.
www.nintendo.ca

PIRANHA GAMES INC.
www.piranha-games.com
Selected Softography:
Die Hard: Nakatomi Plaza

PIXEL ESCAPE STUDIOS INC.
www.pixelescape.com
Selected Softography:
Super Splash 3D

PLAYFUL ENTERTAINMENT
www.playfulentertainment.com
Selected Softography:
Grind

POWERUP STUDIOS INC.
www.powerupstudios.com
Selected Softography:
NOMBZ

PROPAGANDA GAMES
www.propagandagames.go.com
8 Selected Softography:
Turok

RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT (VIVENDI UNIVERSAL)
www.radical.ca
9 Selected Softography:
Prototype, Scarface. The World Is Yours, Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The Simpsons: Hit & Run

REACH GAMES
www.reachgames.com
Selected Softography:
Defendoid

RELIC ENTERTAINMENT THQ CANADA
www.relic.com
10 Selected Softography:
Company Of Heroes, Warhammer 40k: Dawn Of War, Homeworld 2, Homeworld

ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER
www.rockstargames.com
11 Selected Softography:
Bully, Homeworld: Cataclysm (as Barking Dog Studios)

SHIFT CONTROL MEDIA
www.shiftcontrol.com
Selected Softography:
Avenue Rally

SLANT SIX GAMES INC.
www.slantsixgames.com
12 Selected Softography:
SOCOM Confrontation, SOCOM Tactical Strike

THREEWAVE SOFTWARE
www.threewavesoftware.com
Selected Softography:
Return to Castler Wolfenstein 2 (multiplayer), Turok (multiplayer), Army Of Two (multiplayer)

UNITED FRONT GAMES
www.unitedfrontgames.com

YAMISOFT ENTERTAINMENT
www.yamisoft.com
Selected Softography:
Cramgene

EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

ART INSTITUTE OF VANCOUVER
www.artinstitutes.edu/vancouver

BCIT - BRITISH COLUMBIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
www.bcit.ca

CENTRE FOR DIGITAL MEDIA
www.mdm.gnwc.ca

EMILY CARR INSTITUTE OF ART & DESIGN
www.eciad.ca

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
www.surrey.sfu.ca

VANCOUVER FILM SCHOOL
www.vfs.com

SELKIRK COLLEGE
www.selkirk.ca

MINISTRY OF ADVANCED EDUCATION POST SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS
www.aved.gov.bc.ca/institutions

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

NEW MEDIA BC
www.newmediabc.com

KOOTENAY
www.kast.com

NORTH-CENTRAL BC
www.cmmgroup.ca

VANCOUVER ISLAND
www.viatec.ca

VANCOUVER ACM SIGGRAPH
www.siggraph.ca

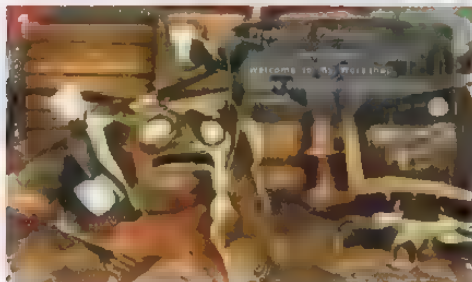
GOVERNMENT

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF CANADA & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CANADA
www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca

PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA MINISTRY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
www.canadaspacificgateway.ca

BRITISH COLUMBIA INNOVATION COUNCIL
www.bcic.ca

VANCOUVER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
www.vancouvereconomic.com



1 *Monster Lab* is an interesting mix of turn-based roleplay, minigames and grisly humour brought to Wii and DS by Backbone Entertainment. The company is also working on a number of Live Arcade titles for Capcom.



2 EA Canada has been behind a slew of FIFA games as well as a fair number of other acronym-friendly sports franchises, including NBA, NHL and SSX. It is also responsible for nine of the 14 official *Need For Speed* games.



3 EA Canada has given a fair degree of autonomy to its Black Box subsidiary studio, resulting in a fantastic game like *Skate*. Using analogue sticks to manipulate the skateboard lent it an unprecedented tactility.



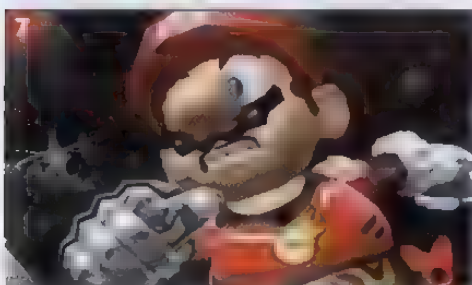
4 However *Penny Arcade Adventures* plays, there's no doubt that Hothead Games has enthusiastically fulfilled its remit and brought both Penny Arcade and its creators' idiosyncratic taste in videogames to life.



5 Ironclad's *Sins Of A Solar Empire* performed the incredible feat of allowing the player to manipulate both the empire as a whole and the tactics of individual ships simultaneously - we hope it gets a Euro release.



6 Klei Entertainment were behind the Xbox Live Arcade version of Metanet's playful physics-based freeware PC platformer, *M*. Like the PC editions, there is an in-built editor to complement the 300-odd levels.



7 Although Nintendo Canada is a PR branch rather than a studio proper, the company maintains links to the Vancouver industry through Next Level Games, which developed *Mario Strikers Charged* and *Super Mario Strikers*.



8 Propaganda Games' *Jurok* fell short of greatness, but it did many things right - particularly when it came to stabbing witless enemies in the spine. The multiplayer was built by fellow Vancouverites Threewave Software.



9 Radical Entertainment has already proven that it can create explosive action in huge, open worlds, but we will have to wait and see if the intriguing narrative ideas set out to appear in *Prototype* really work.



10 *Company Of Heroes* is Relic's latest and greatest RTS, and grabbed the company plenty of awards. Relic's plan now is to take the brand into the free-to-play market, but without compromising quality of depth.



11 Rockstar Vancouver, creator of *Bully*, was originally Barkin' Dog Studios before its acquisition and had previously attained wide distinction for *HomeWard*, *Cataclysm* and its work with Valve on *Counter-Strike*.



12 As Sony's big tactical shooter brand, it was little surprise to see a new instalment of *SOCOM* announced for the PS3. With support for 32 players online, however, the game should boost the console's online credentials.



VANCOUVER: FJORD VIEWING PLEASURE

WE FIND OUT HOW SNOW, SUSHI AND SCRUM HAVE MADE VANCOUVER AN ENVIABLE PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK



If immigration is at all an issue for the development community in Vancouver then it's only a bureaucratic problem: it's hard to find anyone who expresses regret at moving to Vancouver or even nostalgia for the place they have left. As we sit in a pub in Yaletown, the bustling social centre of downtown Vancouver packed with nightspots and eateries, we later to Action Pants exec and sometime-Geordie Nik Palmer describe his last underwhelming visit to the UK, courtesy of the British public transport system: we tentatively ask if any of the three ex-British domiciles at the table - Palmer, Omar Al-Khafaji and Simon Andrews - miss the place at all. There are a few seconds of laughter before anyone realises it was actually a serious question.

On the days of clement weather, such as those we are lucky enough to experience, it's not hard to see

why Vancouver has been able to amass such a diverse immigrant population. We fly in at sunset, pink light picking out the snow-covered peaks of the North Shore Mountains, peeking at the top of pines around the fjord-cut coast. It's not a bad introduction: it's just as dramatic from ground level, too. Even in the

WITH SO MANY ATTRACTIONS COMPETING FOR VANCOUVERITES' LEISURE TIME, THEY ENDEAVOUR TO HAVE AS MUCH OF IT AS POSSIBLE

cosmopolitan areas of downtown, the grid network of streets creates clear views of the surrounding landscape from the city's heart. You will frequently come to an intersection, look to cross the road and be assaulted by a picture postcard view of misty, snow-capped white mountainside. A 15-minute saunter from Action Pants' central offices and you are looking out

towards the mouth of English Bay - a stunning body of water hemmed by hazy peaks and forests.

Of course, it isn't just for looks. Mountains can be skied, snowboarded, climbed, abseiled, trekked and otherwise exhilaratingly enjoyed - activities one would not immediately associate with the sedentary

stereotype of the game developer. Visit development studios elsewhere and you might readily expect to see walls of prize boxes, stacked so high as to shut out the light from the sun. Yet here, that stereotype is a rare thing indeed. Quickly surveying the pastimes of our roundtable contributors leaves us feeling tired already. Craig Docherty recommends a trip up 13



GLOOM BOX

Of course, not everything is always rosy in Vancouver. For one thing, it rains a fair amount — almost twice the average annual rainfall of London. It has one of the highest rates of property crime in Canada according to the US government's Overseas Security Advisory Council, although crime in general is markedly lower than in most US cities and has fallen dramatically in the last number of years. There is also a substantial drug problem. Downtown East Side has a particularly heavy population of vacant-eyed addicts and vagrants, attracted by the comparatively mild weather and programmes addressing addictions and mental health. Worst of all, however, is Vancouver's creepy obsession with small, repulsive dogs — often to be seen peering boss-aved from the cavity of a handbag, dressed up as Elvis, or the street like unnaturally re-animated



Whistler, a resort town an hour-and-a-half out of Vancouver, host to some of the best skiing and mountain biking to be had in North America. Maureen O'Reily favours the Grouse Grind — an arduous trek that ascends 853 metres (2,800 feet) in 2.9 kilometres (1.8 miles). Sheri Kashman likes to head over to the town of Squamish to hang from a sheer granite cliff face by her fingernails, while Dan Irish indulges in a spot of ultimate Frisbee with one of Vancouver's 250 odd teams.

"I suggest a day at the Burnaby Velodrome," says Rob McMurtry. "It's one of three covered velodromes in North America. That's a 47-degree track. And you can break 70 kilometres going around it. It's a lot of fun. Or you can do triathlons and in August or September and dive with tentacles and squid sharks. Omar A. Khafa agrees. "It's a good chance there's any number of opportunities to interact with

water. Boating-wise there's fantastic sailing round here. You can go around all the islands and see whales and dolphins and seals and so on."

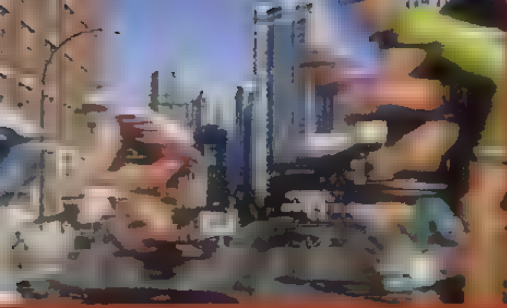
Finally, Nik Farmer offers something a little less exhausting. "Microbreweries in Vancouver are fantastic — better than anywhere I've been to by a mile. The same goes for eating out in Vancouver — one week you can go and have sushi, Mongolian, Chinese, Indian, Russian — and that's just in the same three blocks."

Needless to say, with so many attractions competing for Vancouver tourists' time, they endeavor to have as much fun as possible. The work-life balance after a streaking point with hard industry so famously adopted to Toronto is a top priority. "It's the development studios, we visit Vancouver's sites to taste place to live and we try to take advantage of that," says Reineger.

manager, Tarrnie Williams. "We have company ski passes so people can go out skiing; we do yoga classes and they like to help people get the full Vancouver experience. But maybe the most important thing is that if you come by at 6:30 there's nobody here — everybody's gone home. You walk around at the weekends and there's nobody here. We want people to leave work on time! We truly believe that they work better and are happier if they're not here all the time. I've lived in those environments and I've worked in those environments and we're not if we're about making games in a 40-hour week."

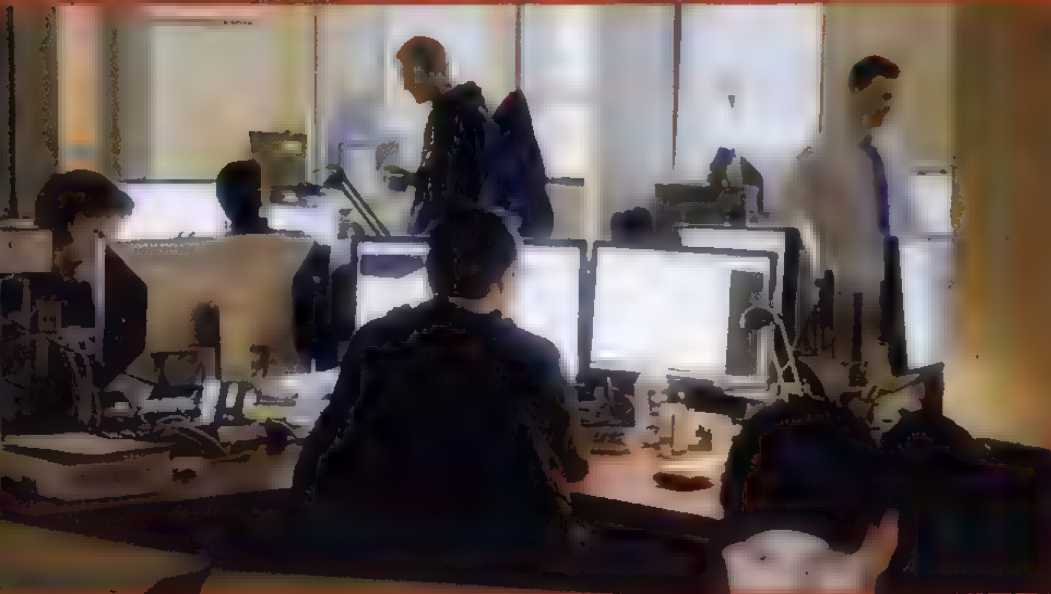
Jonathan Lowdeswell says this attitude, shared by so many of the studios here, is born out of antipathy for the working practices of Electronic Arts, from which so many of the developers came.

EA was very much a you'll work hard and you are expected to do 12-hour days kind of place. The



RUNTIME ENVIRONMENTS

...the way we've organised our teams and the way we've organised our workflow. It's not just about the technology, it's about the people and the way they work together.



says. "The entire industry was ten years younger and it was a really exciting time to be a part of, and no-one minded doing those 12-hour putting that investment in."

Everyone was 21 or 23, nobody had kids or girlfriends," Williams adds. "It was great. And then there was a time when it became not so great."

"So a lot of these comparisons go off to what rules Dowdeswell. Some didn't try to change [the working practices], they thought that was how you made games. Some tried and weren't successful. One of the things we've always said at Relic is that if the only way we can make games is to work 12 hours a day then we're in the wrong business. Let's figure out the games we can make in eight hours a day, make them really good, then go, 'we're out of work'."

How Relic achieves this along with Threeave and Radical, is by championing Scrum - a subset of

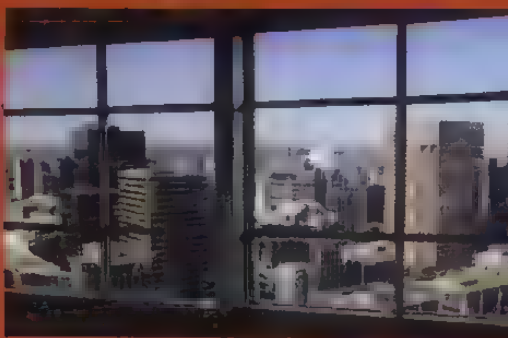
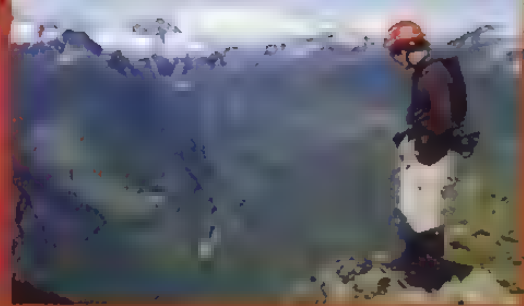
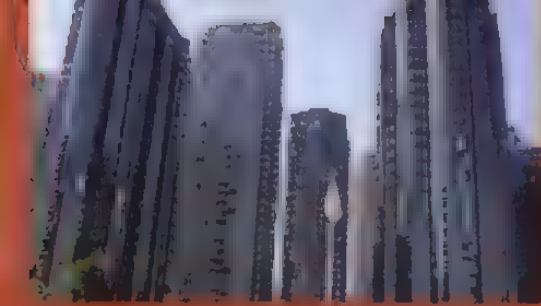
the Agile Development system that breaks down teams into autonomous, interdisciplinary groups in the hope of greatly improving worker efficiency and happiness.

"There are a number of different agileness and methodologies, and Scrum is the one we use," says Dowdeswell. "A lot of them evolved out of Toyota's manufacturing practices in the 1970s, which revolutionised manufacturing." That scrum specifically comes from enterprise-level software development. It's best explained through comparison: in the past a team of 50 people was made up of 15 programmers, 15 artists, ten designers, a bunch of project managers and producers. You'd have one person managing all the programmers and eight or six months they'd throw technology at the artists who'd go "Argh! It doesn't work for us," and the programmers would say, "Well, we're busy." With

scrum, that same 50 people are divided into five groups, but each of those groups has programmers, artists and designers. Every group is cross-discipline. So you then say, "you are the cross-functional team that will make the vehicles," you are the team that will make the multi-layer gameplay." Because you're employing a team, one core objective is to free up management staff and producers from having to "quarterly" the tasks and direct the jobs, and so they have more time to look at the teams themselves. It removes the need to do what they should do, they spend more time seeing that everything's working."

As well, and good, how does such reorganisation work to reduce crunch?

"Absolutely. Calling it crunch does it really work any more," says Williams. "For the two games we've made with Scrum, and we're talking 90 per cent plus



products, there were a couple of weeks overtime at the end of each one. We like it.

Threewave are similarly enamoured with their chosen flavour of Agile Development. "Right now we're finishing DLC for *Army of Two*," says Stephane Morichere-Matte, director of product development.

"WHEN PEOPLE STAY LATE IT TENDS TO BE BECAUSE THEY'RE PLAYING TEAM FORTRESS 2" - STEPHANE MORICHERE-MATTE, THREEWAVE

"The overtime has been pretty much nonexistent barring a two week period just at beta. When people stay late it tends to be because they're playing *Team Fortress 2*."

Lan Brady, CEO of Blue Castle, games, is less convinced of Agile or Scrum, but his management techniques seem no less egalitarian, though he says:

"It's mandated by common sense. I'm not much of a believer in acronyms or catchphrases or taglines. For the most part each of the teams here are reasonably autonomous groups where if they have a way they want to do things they're encouraged to experiment and find their own path. I don't believe in enforcing

structure and development practices on people.

What I like to tell the staff is that I don't want to work in a company that's nine to five. What I want to do is make sure we're in a place enough that if someone chooses that they want to explore and go above and beyond then the reason they're going that is that it's their choice, not because

something blew up or something happened to make them do it.

Brady cites the fact that Blue Castle is located in the Burnaby suburb, rather than downtown, as a concession to those employees looking for families and a little more open space. Perhaps this is what Action Pants Omar A-Khafaji means when he says during the roundtable discussion that the industry's culture here is a culture of process. Vancouver's development community, as hard working and passionate as it is, has a maturity about it, a sensitivity to the diversity of its staff and the interests. Perhaps as Dawdeswell suggests, it's a reaction to the hard labour enforced by previous taskmasters, just as likely though it's a reflection of their environment, a city of so many diversions and delights that it would be too hardy to quote them.





DATE FOUNDED	1999
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	100
URL	relicentertainment.com
SOFTWARE	Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War, Company of Heroes, The Outfit, Dawn of War II, Company of Heroes 2



RELIC ENTERTAINMENT

Relic's execs dig themselves out from their pile of awards to tell us how they mastered the RTS



"To this day people still associate Relic with *Homeworld*," says executive producer Jonathan Dowdeswell, relating the enthusiastic reaction of fans upon spotting the Relic team as they passed through San Francisco's airport.

Whether you're at the airport or just meeting people generally, you always hear, 'Oh wow, *Homeworld*!' It created a huge following."

The epic space strategy game, released in 1999, was Relic's first title. It set a new benchmark for PC graphics upon its release and its subsequent success has defined the company's growth since. As Dowdeswell tells us, being renowned in a certain genre becomes self-fulfilling – people who know and love the genre want to work with you, compounding your specialisation.

Being one of the best in your field is not a bad reputation to have. Following the release of *Homeworld 2* and *Impossible Creatures*, publisher THQ stepped onto the scene, inviting Relic to bring its RTS skills to bear on the *Warhammer 40,000* licence before promptly acquiring the studio. Since then Relic has released its first console game, *The Outfit*, further expansions to *Dawn Of War* and, what many might consider its piece de resistance, *Company Of Heroes*.

"*Company Of Heroes* has been quite well received," says Dowdeswell, somewhat underplaying the cascade of technical songs, Game Of The Year

awards and high scores that the game received (including an **Edge 9**). There's been one expansion already, but Relic's next instalment will take the game, and company, in a new direction.

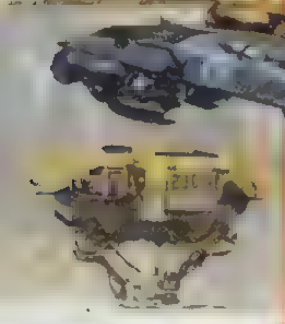
"We're working with a company called Shanda in China on microtransactions for *Company Of Heroes Online*," says general manager Tarnie Williams. "It's an area we think is going to continue to grow and explode."

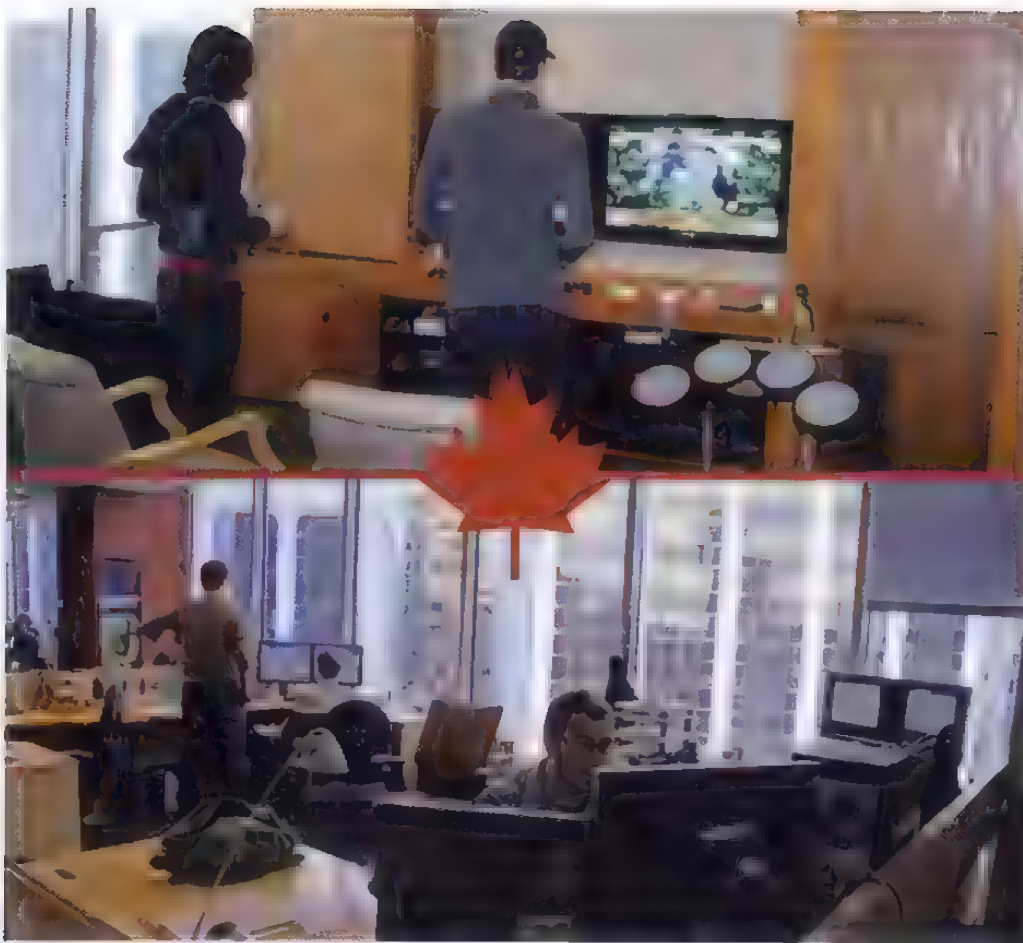
Following the free-to-play model already championed by Shanda in Asia is a bold step – but Relic is hoping that the build quality and brand recognition it can bring as an experienced developer will help establish its presence at the vanguard. And that's not the only new direction they're pursuing.

"We're certainly looking at areas outside of RTS," says Williams. "It's a category that's become quite niche, and while we're crafting these very good experiences, they're perhaps for a small number of people. And we want to craft something for a larger number of people – that does mean reaching out across platforms, moving outside of that hardcore niche."

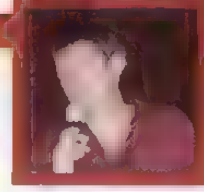
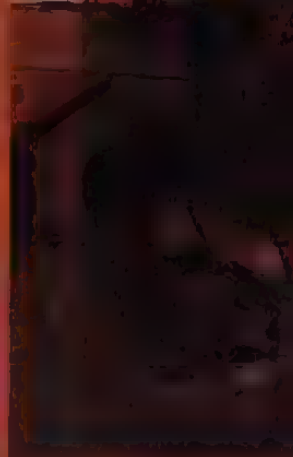
Large portions of Relic's brightly lit, lively offices are cordoned off as testament to this. Clearly, Relic's expertise in the RTS is a given – but, far from instilling complacency, the endless accolades have simply prompted Relic to look for other genres to conquer.

1 Unusually for an RTS, *Company Of Heroes* boasts a powerful narrative
 2 *Impossible Creatures* was likely the first game to feature scorpions with tiger-heads
 3 The one that kicked off Relic's career: *Homeworld*
 4 *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*





Jon's office are located in a smart...



Interview:

Jonathan Dowdeswell Tarnie Williams

Executive producer
General manager

Was there a decision to specialise in the RTS or did it just happen?

Jonathan Dowdeswell: It happened fairly organically and, even at the beginning of the relationship with Sierra, what was pitched wasn't an RTS – it was a spaghetti ball in space. It was going to be a space combat game, but throughout development I became clear the game should be an RTS. At a studio level, what happens after that is people who are interested in the RTS become interested in your studio, and you hire people like that and so competency in that area develops. And after a while it becomes synonymous with what you're doing. Now we're at a point where we can begin to transition into other things and hire people in other areas.

Tarnie Williams: I think a lot has to

do with *Company Of Heroes* because the focus with that was to make an RTS that was such high quality in every area, the art on the game is of a level comparable with recent FPS games if you zoom in. In fact, there was a recent poll about favourite first-person shooters in which it ranked third even though of course it's not an FPS – ahead of some other fairly well-known FPS games. There's a bit of confusion, obviously. We were sort of happy about that. You end up being able to aim for some of the higher ability of applicants in their fields of art and design. You can expect Relic to branch out into other fields. It's exciting.

So does that mean moving towards multiplatform development as well as other genres?

JD: It is tricky to pull off with an RTS.

We believe in PC. The PC is shifting, it's not dying. We still believe in it. But there is also a tremendous number of people who play their games on consoles. And we want to focus on making great games and accessing as many people as we can.

TW: The other thing is that we've always focussed on multiplayer, and consoles now allow multiplayer in that way. And that changes our perspective because the quality you can now achieve on the PS3 and 360 with the art fidelity and connectivity – the difference between what you can deliver there and on the PC is less than it has been in previous generations. Perhaps in the past we felt that making our games for a console audience would have meant compromising them a little. Now, the power is such that there's no question of that.

In terms of console RTS games, what do you think about streaming controls, in the context of games like *Endwar* with its use of voice commands?

JD: One of the ones that really gets me at the moment is the multitouch screens for PC control, where you can draw straight onto a screen – the kind of technology that's going to become more ubiquitous in the next five or so years, so you can actually touch the screen in multiple locations at once. And you can imagine sitting there saying, "I want those guys over there" and just pointing to make it happen. But I think the bulk of the market is still static. As people get more of these things we try and incorporate them, you need to think about what the adoption rate might be when you think about supporting it.





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HOMEWORLD

WARHAMMER
**DAWN
OF
WAR**

COMPANY OF HEROES

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Blue Castle Games in Vancouver is **HIRING**.

We are working on some epic titles like

[REDACTED] and **[REDACTED]**.

We have great people and we constantly strive to be the best. But, what's most

exciting is **[REDACTED]**. Seriously,

the **[REDACTED]** in **[REDACTED]**

will blow you away. We get so pumped to

work on **[REDACTED]**, especially because

of the **[REDACTED]**.



We'd love to talk, but we can't.

Check us out at bluecastlegames.com



NAME: Blue Castle Game
DATE FOUNDED: 2012
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 105
URL: bluecastlegame.com
SOFTOGRAPHY: [Redacted]

BLUE CASTLE GAMES

Rumours abound. The offices are in lockdown. Just what are they building in there?

The rumours that Blue Castle is working on something big. Not just *The Bigs*, you can't believe everything you hear, but what if it helps it if the rumours regarding Blue Castle's next game get us a little excited. We probe director of talent strategy and acquisition Kraig Docherty for any hints – do we have reason to be excited or is this just a successful piece of guerrilla marketing? All we get is an inscrutable grin. Left alone in his office, we inspect the desks, bookshelves and shelves for clues – to no avail.

So then, Blue Castle: makers of sports and action games, and masters of discretion to boot. It's something of a trademark, apparently.

We always wanted to prove ourselves first," says CEO Dan Brady. "We didn't want to be a loud infant, rattle publishers' feathers or take pot shots. That stuff might have made staffing much easier, you get space in publications when you're trash-talking. It draws people to you. But when we started we were under the radar – pretty much no one knew about us at all."

Proof came in the form of *The Bigs*, an arcadey baseball game built on proprietary engines spanning five different platforms. "We have the respect of a lot of people now," says Brady. "This is when we turn that into more success for Blue Castle. Part of that is

breaking out of the sports genre – we're not a one-trick pony by any stretch of the imagination."

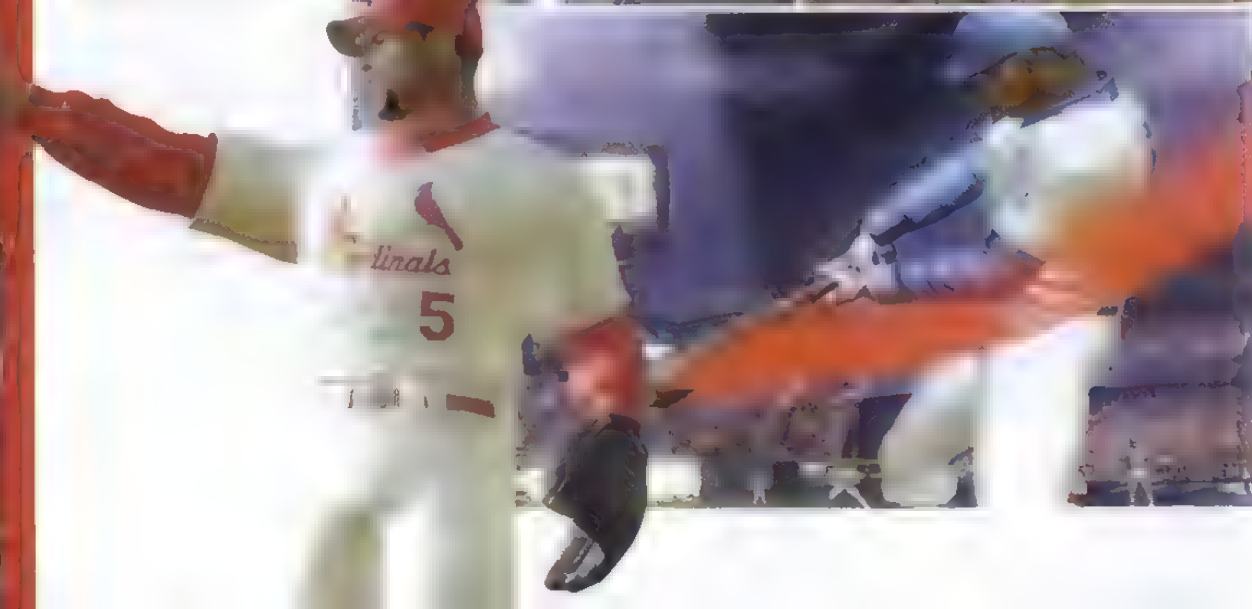
Now a three-team studio, Blue Castle is eager for more talent to work on a number of undisclosed projects, growing from a workforce of 105 to around 150 over the next ten to 12 months.

"Certainly we have a lot of growth on the near horizon," says Docherty. "We're in a fortunate position now where we have a lot of senior, industry-leading people who are great mentors. That helps us take people from school, or get people from other industries, which stops us becoming stale. I know it happens in other companies, but people have stated specifically that they want to come here and work for this or that individual. Mentorship is part of our values statement – we're not just blowing smoke up your tail, we live by those rules and hold ourselves accountable."

Finally, Blue Castle is upping the volume – its slick multimedia website being at the forefront of a push to attract new talent. Despite all the videos and interviews, however, Blue Castle has diligently censored anything that might confirm any rumour. It may be getting more vocal, but it still knows that silence is one of the best ways to fuel intrigue.



➤ Larger-than-life baseball game *The Bigs* shipped on five platforms to positive reviews, and used tech that Blue Castle had built from the ground up – a claim few companies can make for their first release.





Interview: Don Brady

CEO

Where did Blue Castle come from?

Well, we opened our doors on July 4 in Vancouver in 2005 with 12 people. I had been working at EA – everyone in this town worked for EA at one point or another, that's the nature of a town with a studio like EA's with 2000 people. They comprise probably half the dev staff in Vancouver. Most of us are quite proud of that fact, actually. Many of the other companies were started by people who didn't have a good run at EA or were a little bitter at EA for some reason. We're different – we started because a lot of us had moved up the ranks at EA and it was clear we wouldn't get to work together again. I was a tech director and had been for seven years, one of my specialties was building teams. So I'd build a team, then they'd move me on to fight another fire. It became apparent to me that I was not going to have a chance to work with the people I'd mentored up to that point. These were people I really wanted to learn

from, and I guess they still wanted something from me – and Blue Castle was how that happened.

Did you start the company with a specific idea of the games you wanted to make?

We had some game ideas, some product proposals and whatnot, but what happened ultimately was that 2K eventually heard that I was out there looking for work. They'd been trying to recruit me for years, but at the time I'd never considered them as a possibility. They'd just done this big deal for the Major League Baseball semi-exclusive, so they needed baseball games made, and I had started a baseball game with EA that was directly in competition with them. They were desperate to have a game at this point – and so we came up with *The Bigs*, the over-the-top arcade version. We had talks with them and we clicked right away. We're really appreciative of the staff they helped give us.

You're now doing action games as well as sports. Has this had an effect on the kind of staff you are trying to attract?

We have a greater and a wider draw certainly, we get many more people from abroad than before, from the States, other parts of Canada, as well as people from other disciplines and genres of games. It's been really good to draw in some other personalities and it's really healthy for the company. A priority for us was to staff out the seniority side in anticipation of widening later on, so one source of pride at the moment is our ability to take people on. It's a much more efficiently running company now than I was at 80 people – or even when it was at 20 people. We're really excited about where we are and where we're going. A few years from now my goal is to have everyone in the industry know who Blue Castle is and, hopefully, a lot of them will want to work here.



Blue Castle's offices are based in a former warehouse outside the downtown core in the suburb of Burnaby, catering to both staff who want the nightlife and those who prefer a quiet workspace.



Blue Castle's rapid delivery is key to emphasize the company's values, including a commitment to originality and supporting new employees.



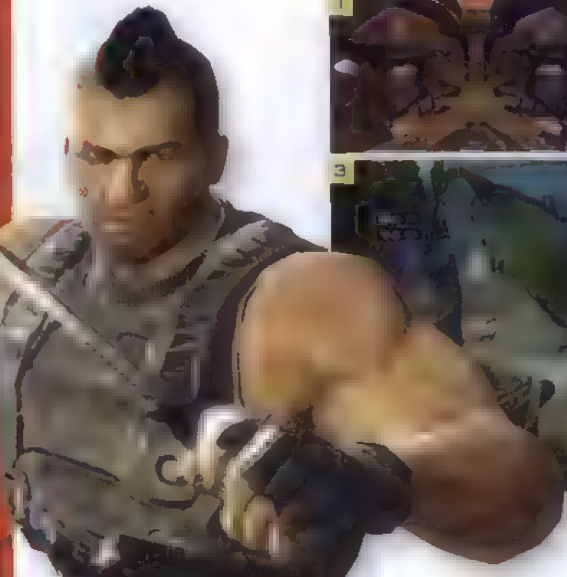
5000 = profit

THREEWAVE

DATE FOUND
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1 Threewave grew from the mod team behind a version of Capture The Flag for Quake 3 2 Army Of Two's multiplayer modes aimed to hook players with character customisation 3 Threewave kept Turok's dinosaurs in multiplayer too



THREEWAVE SOFTWARE

From mod-makers to masters of the multiplayer art, Threewave's dynamism is rooted in specialisation

There aren't many outsourcing teams that can claim to regularly create something distinct and self-enclosed – something identifiably their own. And yet, with a decade of expertise in the dynamics of online play, Threewave does just that, crafting multiplayer components to enrich games developed elsewhere. But although mastery of this specialises sense of ownership, Threewave has the advantage of being able to draw inspiration and resources from the singleplayer game. Subsequently, there's a fast turnaround on projects, enabling staff to work on a variety of titles in a short space of time.

Being beholden to the schedule of another developer can be tricky to negotiate. Their tailor-made multiplayer for *Lampire: The Masque of Bloodlines* got it in the neck when the singleplayer didn't meet its milestones. By contrast, *Army Of Two's* delay allowed Threewave to get some down-to-earth content in shape before the game shipped.

We often start when the singleplayer hasn't been finished," says Stephane Monchere-Marte, director of product development. "So a lot of the time we end up doing optimisation on the art assets to check the game is playable at 30 or 60 frames per second with 16 people. We have to push our artists and our creators, because on any single project our mandate is to exceed the level of the singleplayer."

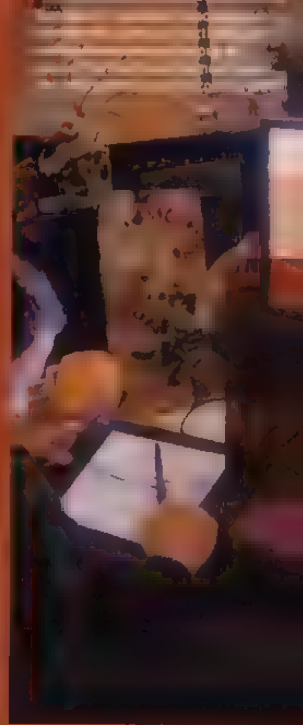
Threewave's multi-player pedigree was established

back in the days of the *Quake* mod community creating a Capture The Flag game-type that brought the group to the notice of Activision. After working on a number of Activision's franchises, Threewave took the unusual decision to bring in someone from outside the company to act as its CEO.

"I had written a book called *The Game Producer's Handbook*," recalls Dan Irish. "They read it, noticed I lived in Vancouver, and sent me an email to see if I'd help them. Their focus was very myopic, and they had only ever worked on this specific part of the process. I had the experience of working from beginning to end on multiple projects, big franchises, and my publishing experience was very helpful in negotiating deals – something they recognised they needed."

Threewave has since worked on titles for six different publishers on a range of platforms, using Unreal, id and Source technology. Most recently it completed the multiplayer for *Army Of Two* and *Turok* with work on *Return To Castle Wolfenstein 2's* multiplayer still underway. Perhaps it seems a bit of a paradox but, by maintaining a narrow focus, Threewave has created the opportunity to work on more material and develop a much broader knowledge of tech than would be possible elsewhere. And with connectivity becoming one of the most important frontiers in this generation of videogames, it looks like that might come in very useful indeed.





Interview:

Dan Irish

Stephane Morichere-Matte

What have you learned working on so many different technologies and with multiple publishers?

Dan Irish: The most important thing we've learned is that processes we use need to be flexible enough to be applicable to any number of franchises. You can't just mat yourself to the *Doom* and *Quake* universe. And, looking at multiplayers as a whole, we explore ways in which we can make the content more appealing and stick the user into the community, whether it's with friends or downloadable content. It's not just, "Here are the multiplayer maps," then move on to the next thing. It's all about how you engage the player. We've also put together a set of best practices that allow the game designers to measure their work and have a foundation before they even start developing the

game. One of the metrics we use is time to first encounter. **Stephane Morichere-Matte:** Basically, does it take you two minutes to see someone in the map, or ten seconds? And we essentially tune that based on the IP we're working on, it's one of the factors we evaluate our content against to ensure we're tailoring appropriately.

That seems like something that might grow organically out of the IP you've been given – but, in fact, it's the other way round?

SM M: It works the other way round because we think of it in terms of, for example, whether the game will be two or three hours. It also depends on the twitchiness of what we want to create. But in some of the metrics we're working on, I think one of the things

Director of project development

that Dan has done since joining Threewave is trying to figure out how to translate the art of the original three founders into a more scientific basis for our decision. Making things more systematic, you know, why are you having more fun all of a sudden? Why is that? If you have a question like "Is this weapon overpowered?" then maybe you can look at the metrics and see that it's only being used two per cent of the time – so it's probably not overpowered. Let's not waste too much time thinking about things to which there are measurable responses.

So do you model player behaviour?

DI: We don't model player behaviour but we certainly track things like A in the charts. We concentrate on making the game as fun as we can in the time we have, rather than trying



CEO

Director of project development

a whole bunch of extra weapons that no one will ever use – focusing on making three- or four-player classes unique and fun to play rather than making ten or 12.

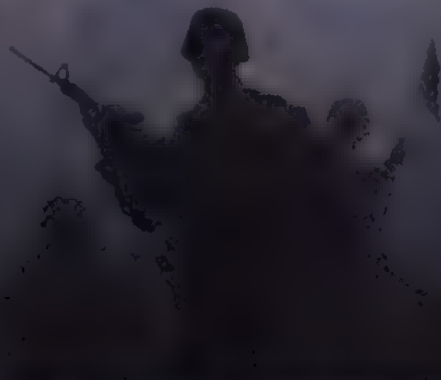
You have this multiplayer speciality – do you want to stick with that?

DI: Singleplayer isn't really our focus at the moment and I think the team here really enjoys the fact that they can recognise their work very quickly. Usually the multiplayer is the last part of the game to be done, so you have the entire rest of the experience to draw upon. In two years, people have worked on three different games. For now, multiplayer is where we really want to refine our expertise to the level where if you want the best multiplayer team in the world, you come to Threewave.



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RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT

How Prototype's makers fought back from extinction to become a leading force in open world gaming



It is a company that has been through a lot. The oldest among those profiled in this feature, Radical Entertainment was founded in 1991, seeing out the tail end of 8-bit videogaming with *Mano Is Missing*, and ushering in the heyday of 16-bit videogaming with a series of licences ranging from *Wayne's World* and ESPN sports games to *Beavis and Butt-head*. Then things went wrong.

A few contracts didn't go the way we thought they would," says Amber Jordan, senior employee retention manager. "Some pretty tough decisions had to be made. The branch in San Francisco had to be shut down. We almost lost the company, but we raised, got our creditors on board and got the key team members to give it another go, and they did. They resurrected the company.

Something we hear from both Jordan and Radical's president, Kelly Zmak, is that Radical's not too proud to learn from its mistakes. With every error comes revision and improvement – and if at one point Radical looked like it might go belly up, then much has changed to make sure the situation doesn't arise again. Now, with the backing of a steady, 330-strong workforce and a number of successful and technically ambitious titles under its belt, it can also

claim to have a core competence in building free-roaming games. The first of its original IPs, *Prototype*, is due for release this summer. It's an apt name given Radical's insistence on learning from its mistakes.

"You try, you fail, then you try and succeed," says Zmak. "You may have invested a lot of money to get something somewhere, and it doesn't work. There were at least three, if not four, prototypes of *Prototype*. What's remarkable to me is that the control mechanics haven't fundamentally changed. Then you think about how the ability to deceive works. How is the AI working with your character – what if you're somewhere where you're not supposed to be, but you're [disguised as] a beautiful woman? The adrenaline of the combat is a fairly easy experience to create, but when you start to get into things like anticipation and anxiety, more subtle things, that's a much more difficult set of emotions to bring out in the gamer – and it's a much more iterative process to get there.

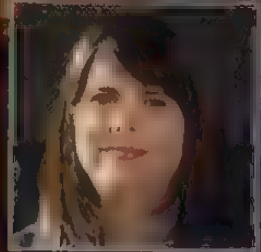
Radical has battled turbulence enough times in the past to know that what you get out of that kind of challenge is always richer than had you risked nothing at all: you can't learn from your mistakes if you aren't willing to make them.

1 Radical brought the madcap *Crash Tag Team Racing* to PS2, Xbox and GameCube ■ *Scarface: The World Is Yours* lets you live out the coke-fuelled fantasy of a Cuban drug baron ■ Forget superheroes, *Prototype* puts you in the shoes of a deadly and completely amoral mutant ■ The game that really solidified Radical's reputation as a creator of free-roaming worlds was *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*





Radical's offices are just outside of the downtown area. The area designated for development by the city is a company makes amenities with a stocked cafeteria.



Amber Jordan's role is ensuring that employees are happy to stay at Radical.



President

Interview: Kelly Zmak

You've said you thought the open world genre was becoming stale...

Open world gaming is brutally hard even at its most basic level. I would say our industry starts at Hard and we try to keep it from going Stupid – there's no Easy or Medium. It takes an enormous amount of work to do what we do – you have team sizes of 70 to 80 people working for 30 months. Babies are born, people die, people get married, people get divorced, life happens in 30 months. And over that two-and-a-half years they have to remain balanced, they have to remain focused, they have to remain consistent and driven towards this common goal that 80 people have rallied their minds and hearts and passion around to create. It takes the same amount of effort to produce something average as it does to produce something exceptional. What makes it exceptional? That little bit of magic right at the end, because you did all the right things early on, you

learned from your mistakes, you were allowed to make mistakes, we're not afraid of little failures, we think we learn from them – but we build on what we do and what we've done. I think the challenge is people always underestimate how much effort it takes to pull it off. You can't formulaise what these games are – there is no formula to greatness, you can't bottle it. If you put a group of people together who love what they're doing that's how you might get greatness.

The open world has got a little stymied in a genre stereotype. Surely the tech offers more?

We think this is a marketplace that can appeal beyond the core audience and we as a group can create games that will appeal to women and a broader demographic than the 18-34 demographic. We're just beginning to explore what that means and the level of maturity and sophistication around the tech is

unexplored. It's kind of like the Wii. Remember when that was announced and everyone was ripping the name? Who's laughing now? That was brilliant. So you step back and think "How do we use the nunchuk? The remote?" Thank God Nintendo's actually broken out of that mould and is forcing folks to think differently. Take that analogy and apply it to the open world genre – everyone thinks of the stereotype and we want to step outside it. That doesn't mean that the stereotype isn't valuable – GTA is an invaluable asset to the industry as well as the Rockstar. What we believe is you can evolve, revolve and morph that to create new experiences.

So how are you doing that with Prototype?

I think that concept is a huge piece of this. As a shapeshifter you can take on the appearance and skills of anyone you want to be able to fly a helicopter, you've got to consume a

plot. You're the most powerful weapon in the game – that's not normal. The fantasy element draws us away from the classic stereotype. The other key piece is that when you take on that appearance as this normal person you can use that to surprise enemies in the world. And talking about free-roaming, things will happen to you in this game. You don't walk to an event, trigger it, and then all of a sudden a scenario is happening. Things will happen in realtime, so you may be travelling somewhere and pass by something at the right time and get the opportunity to do something else instead – one option might advance a story thread, one might increase your skillset or give you experience points. You might be mentally prepared to go one way, but we want to give you the choice to go the other. There's so much in there, but you have to find it. You follow the basic thread, you have a basic understanding, but you need to want to explore this world.

EXTRA LIVES

PLANT GARDENS

Plants are a key part of the game's environment, and they can be used in a variety of ways. Some plants are used for decoration, while others are used for practical purposes. For example, you can use plants to create a barrier or to hide from enemies. You can also use plants to create a path or to mark a location. Plants are a versatile tool that can be used in many different ways.

DELETED ENTITIES

Deleted entities are objects that have been removed from the game world. They can be used in a variety of ways, such as to create a path or to mark a location. Deleted entities are a useful tool for creating a more dynamic and interactive environment. They can be used to create a sense of mystery and to add depth to the game world.

TEXT LEVEL DESIGN

Text level design is the process of creating text-based levels for a game. It involves writing text that describes the environment and the objects within it. Text level design is a key part of the game's design, and it can be used to create a more immersive and engaging experience. It can also be used to create a sense of mystery and to add depth to the game world.

WORLD MAP

The world map is a key part of the game's design, and it can be used in a variety of ways. It can be used to create a sense of direction and to help players navigate the game world. The world map can also be used to create a sense of mystery and to add depth to the game world. It is a versatile tool that can be used in many different ways.

STAIRS

Stairs are a key part of the game's environment, and they can be used in a variety of ways. They can be used to create a path or to mark a location. Stairs are a useful tool for creating a more dynamic and interactive environment. They can be used to create a sense of mystery and to add depth to the game world.

ALLIANCE LINES

Alliance lines are a key part of the game's design, and they can be used in a variety of ways. They can be used to create a sense of direction and to help players navigate the game world. Alliance lines can also be used to create a sense of mystery and to add depth to the game world. They are a versatile tool that can be used in many different ways.

LEVEL DESIGN

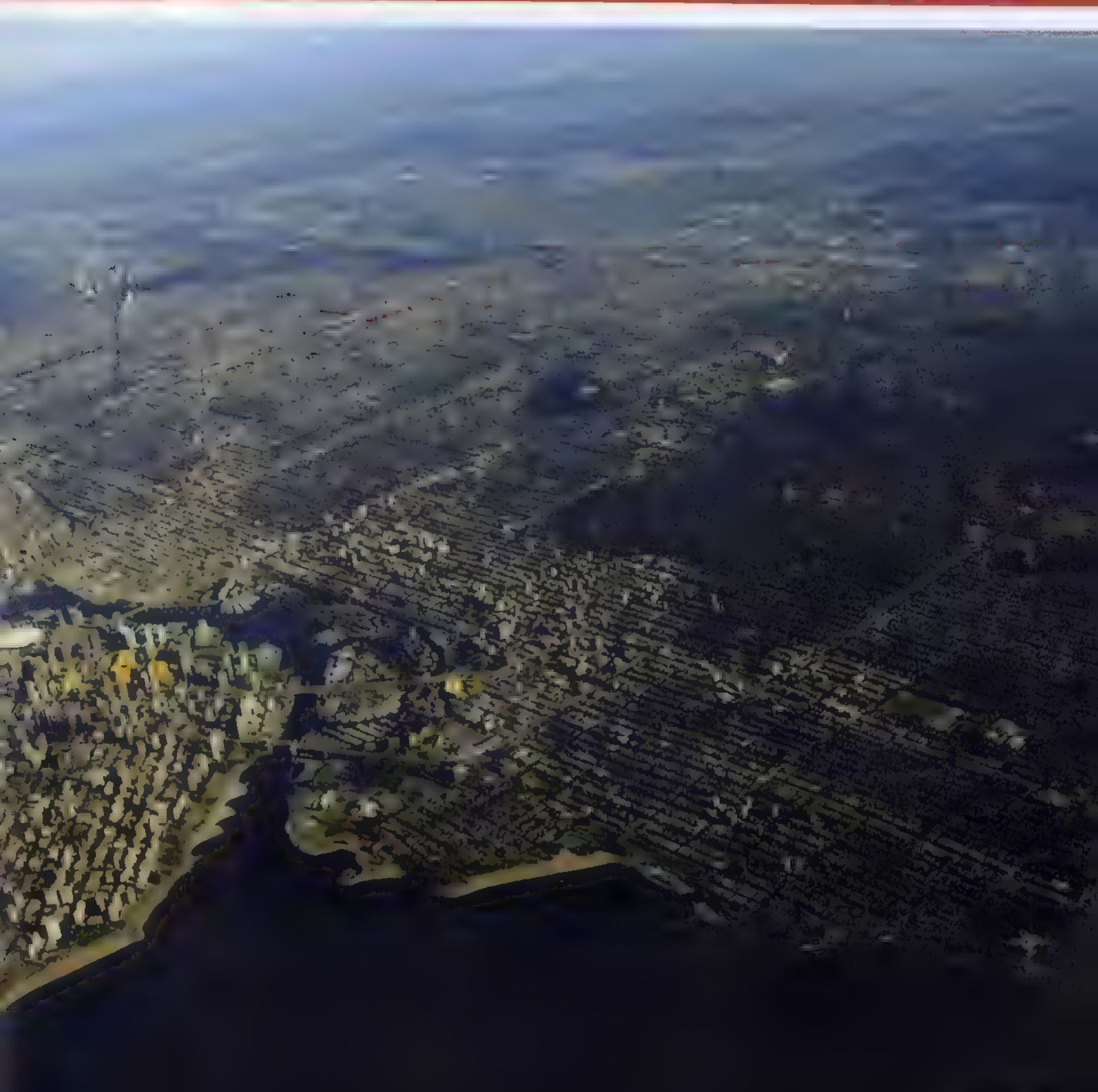
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THE MOUNTAINS

The mountains are a key part of the game's environment, and they can be used in a variety of ways. They can be used to create a path or to mark a location. The mountains are a useful tool for creating a more dynamic and interactive environment. They can be used to create a sense of mystery and to add depth to the game world.



There are a few too many studios in Vancouver to feature them all, but here are eight other organizations to look out for





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"The Nordic Game conference is a high quality, thought provoking, and well balanced event which combines information, technical know how, business, and responsibility for the industry". – Fred Hasson, CEO of Tiga, the UK developers industry association, and Chairman of EGDF, European Games Developer Federation.

"It's a fantastic event where many excellent game designers and developers can get together, exchange their opinions and discuss the future potential of digital entertainment". – Masaya Matsuura, Artist and President of NanaOn-Sha, creator of PaRappa the Rapper and Vib-Ribbon.

"Nordic Game has developed into being an industry conference of the highest quality. To get in touch with all sides of the Nordic Games community, this is the place to be". – Martin Walfisz, President and Founder of Malmö-based Massive Entertainment, the makers of World in Conflict, and Chairman of Spelplan, the association of Swedish game developers.



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At a time when the modern world was facing a new terrorist threat, along came a game with a comfortingly old enemy: the Soviets

Freedom Fighters is a classic example of a game that didn't chime with the so-called 'mass market,' but went on to be cherished as an underground hit. Now it lives on as a cult, often evoked when videogame forums light up with discussions about which games deserved a better reception, which games deserve a sequel.

Even from the outset, *Freedom Fighters* was tarnished with only time-will-tell preview platitudes and struggled to generate much interest. But what emerged was one of the

best titles of its generation and certainly one of the most enjoyable thirdperson shooters ever conceived. Perhaps it was the right game, published at the wrong time. You can sympathise: back in 2001, when the game was presumably being hawked around the publishing community, the world was still reeling from the September 11th attacks. A game set in war-torn Manhattan during the aftermath of a Red Dawn-style Soviet invasion would seem at best, crass and

at worst publishing suicide. Strangely, the shaky premise now feels more of a strength than a weakness – and prescient in light of the invasion of Iraq (see 'Playing politics'). But what IO does well, and what radiates throughout *Freedom Fighters*, is brooding atmosphere. From the early levels liberating city buildings, like the police station and post office, to the glorious final assault on Fort Jay, *Freedom Fighters* is a lesson in creating a sense of place, manipulating mood and changing space to suit the environment.

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Unsurprisingly, Agent 47's fingerprints can be found everywhere. Built from the same engine, the game not only shared the muted tones and edgy stylistics that enveloped *Hitman*, but in terms of level design great attention was paid to height as well as breadth. It's a strange dynamic, given that *Freedom Fighters*, at least on the surface, is a gung-ho shooter. It's entirely possible to beat the game head-on, but the more adventurous player could uncover a wonderful array of hidden areas.

Indeed, the genealogy of *Freedom Fighters* is revealing. After *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* (released in 2002) it's noticeable that IO took a different tack with its next Agent 47 title, *Contracts*. The more episodic approach and ability to blast a way out of trouble surely owed much to the looser and more action oriented level design of *Freedom Fighters*. Developed side by side, the echoes are compelling. There's an eerie familiarity between the mission to assassinate General Tatarin on Governor's Island and the Rotterdam levels in *Silent Assassin* – the dockside warehouses, sniper points and open layout embodying IO's core philosophy of affording player choice. This sense of choice is exemplified

significantly, in the America the game depicted was a more cheeseball, exaggerated version of the society that endured Ronald Reagan's Star Wars proposals. The heroes and villains are stark caricatures, all talking like doomed men on their way to the gallows. This amusingly oppressive mood is played for all it's worth, with Russian propaganda regaling players from speakers, pro-Russian posters hanging in office blocks and Hind gunships constantly in the skies.

TIME EXTEND

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX

PUBLISHER: EA

DEVELOPER: IO INTERACTIVE

DESIGN: EXTENDING

RELEASING DATE: 2003





PLAYING POLITICS

That *Freedom Fighters* was released at all is somewhat surprising as the game was being developed around the time of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Around this time, the publishing community was incredibly sensitive to any references to war or terror in New York with games such as *Metal Gear Solid 2*, *Shinobi* and *Spider-Man 2* edited to remove material deemed too close to the bone. Coincidentally, *Freedom Fighters* was finally released just after the 2003 invasion of Iraq with the game's theme of enforced 'liberation' chiming spookily with the hawkish American and British polemic of the time.



in the numerous alleyways and ledges, leading to secret sniper spots, rooftops and gantries – perfect for pinning enemies down. Interior and exterior locations are combined expertly, the intricate floors and landings of the post office contrasting sharply with the wide open spaces of warehouses or courtyards. Rarely have such familiar locations been infused with such love and detail, and been host to some of the most memorable firefights ever devised.

To play *Freedom Fighters* is like

visiting every favourite teenage haunt from a John Hughes movie, only with a militaristic filter – but at its heart it is a team game, one with a recruitment and command system so balanced so beautifully it should have become an industry standard. Though IO clearly didn't create the game in a vacuum, the command system was, and remains, uniquely ambitious. Yes, Ubisoft's evolving *Ghost Recon* franchise and Pivotal's *Games' Conflict* series use a similar approach with three allies, but IO's allowed players to command up to a dozen recruits.

Initially criticised for being counter-intuitive, with the command options of attack, defend and hold, ground assigned to the face buttons, it worked because the weight of the experience revolved around the mechanic. While selecting weapons and items from a cumbersome wheel system and lobbing missiles with a dodgy analogue aim were less successful, the fact that intelligent use of your recruits could minimise most risk offset these minor gripes.

The command interface generated powerful tactical options. Want to



Chris's charisma would die after heroic deeds, such as helping refugees, liberating buildings and liberally opening manhole covers. High charisma meant more recruits.

plank the machine gunner in the sentry box? Simply place men in high positions to rain down fire while you lob grenades and storm the fortifications. While it's true the levels were hardly wide and expansive, they avoided the tunnelling so prominent in previous squad-based shooters.

Around the time *Freedom Fighters* was released many developers were increasingly looking to marry tactics to action on consoles, largely due to the huge sales titles like *SOCOM: US Navy Seals*, *Syphon Filter* and the Tom

It was gratifyingly entertaining and more than justified by the potency of your enemies. It's the stuff of Commando comic books, not some go-faced military shooter. Charge enemies head-on and you could take out seven or eight like a playground hero, but the delightfully comedic enemy animation was adept at concealing just how vicious a single enemy shotgun blast could be to anything ho strike.

This set up incredibly tense *Butch* and *Sundance* moments: you're holed

Rarely have such familiar locations been infused with such love and detail, and been host to some of the most memorable firefights ever devised

Clancy games were experiencing. But the AI in games like *SOCOM* and *Ghost Recon* was often overbearing, causing your teammates to die problematically either rush heading into crossfire or skulk in pre-set but useless defensive locations.

IO's solution to such AI glitches was devastatingly simple: make the recruits expendable. At first it seems a laughably lazy approach, but in the context of the game it works beautifully. While your recruits' pathfinding ability is generally very good, the game wouldn't grind to a frustrating halt after comrades were wiped out by a suicidal blitz on the enemy. Downed allies could be revived or more volunteers simply located within the level.

But that's not to say *Freedom Fighters* was easy, even if the auto-aim and lock-on initially felt too nannyish, with streams of troops falling from the barrage of your bullets like mobsters in a '50s mafia movie. But

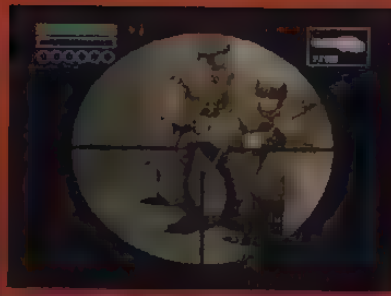
up in an office with only one exit, have only ten bullets left in your assault rifle and have a battalion of Russians creeping up the corridor outside. The manner in which ammo was fairly yet sparingly distributed from dropped weapons added to the tension, offering a chance of glorious salvation in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

But the toughness sometimes tipped over into pig-headed frustration, something not helped by the save system. For the most part, Chris Stone and his ragtag band are holed up in the New York sewer system, a premise that only allowed level access and saves to be made at manhole covers. However, these were usually located just after major battles, so any death sent you painfully back to the last save point.

IO's draconian save restrictions have become a common theme, and complaint. More recently, *Hitman*



Freedom Fighters handled its narrative expertly, with the passing of the months between missions adding to a feeling of nostalgia and lost innocence.



The sniper scope mode was hardly anything new, but IO drew upon its *Hitman* experience by giving the player many vantage points from which they could burst enemy heads like melons.



Blood Money and *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* continued in this vein, forcing players to complete an entire mission or start from scratch if they switched off their console. It could be argued these strictures added tension, but in *Freedom Fighters*, when minigun and rocket launcher carrying enemies appeared later in the game, it was truly terrifying.

But any claim *Freedom Fighters* has to an influence on later games is undermined by its abject commercial performance – the premise was about as appealing as a new Rambo film set in Northern Ireland. Yet IO fleshed out the story and carried through the Red Dawn pastiche from beginning to end triumphantly. There's a real sense that your actions were constantly affecting the fight, with news bulletins reporting the rise of the 'Freedom Phantom' right up to an invasion of the television studio to crush the propaganda machine.

The plotting was done with conviction and humour. Even the end of level flag hoisting was a beautiful touch, not only signifying your capture of key buildings but driving you ever onwards and upwards. It also served as a clever framing device, leading seamlessly into the fabulous cutscenes and giving players a more tangible sense of mastery over both oppressor and environment.

But Fort Jay was the game's crowning achievement; the final assault on the stronghold leaving players in no doubt that they had experienced something special. Machine gunners, swarming infantry, trench defences – and that's before you even enter the Fort – captures the power of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. Once inside,

the claustrophobic corridors circled towers and prison cells drew upon all the tactical squad-marching abilities you'd developed over the game.

Ironically such panegyric contrasts dramatically to the wishy-washy previews the game received prior to release. Though IO has never ruled out a sequel it remains an unlikely prospect in light of the game's performance. *Freedom Fighters 2* was briefly mooted back in 2004, but that was before the company decided to concentrate on a new avenue: *Kane & Lynch*.

But perhaps that's a blessing in disguise. *Freedom Fighters* remains an underground legend; a fitting legacy for a game containing an ordinary plumber with the courage, skills and charisma to save the world.

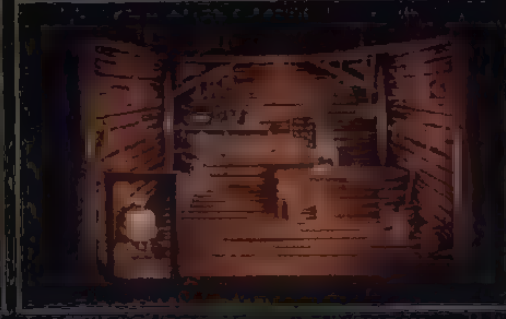
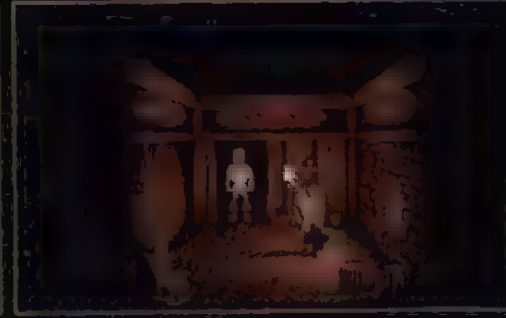
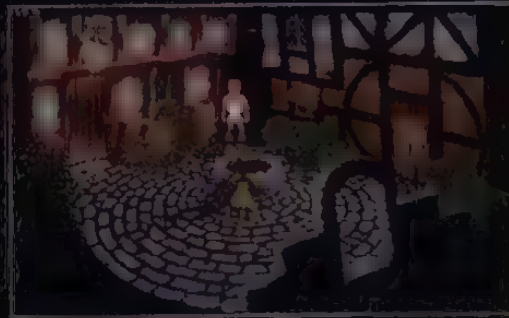
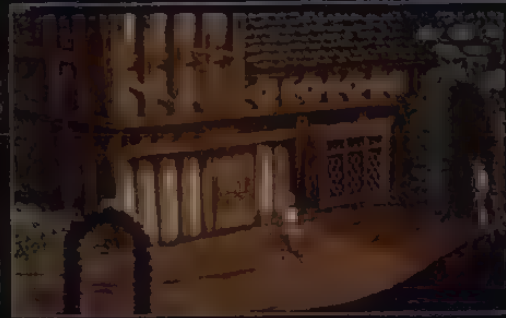
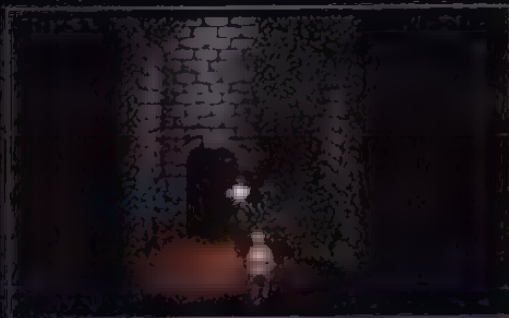
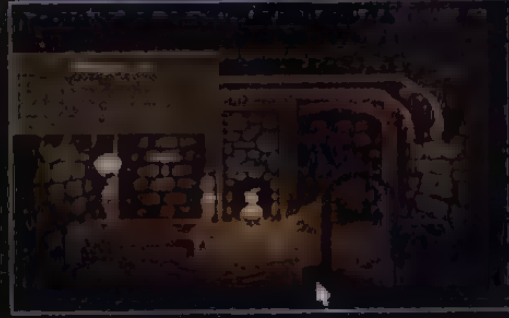
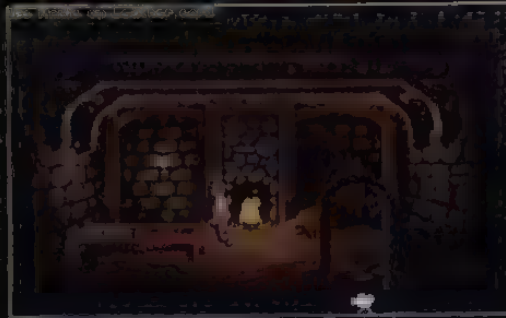
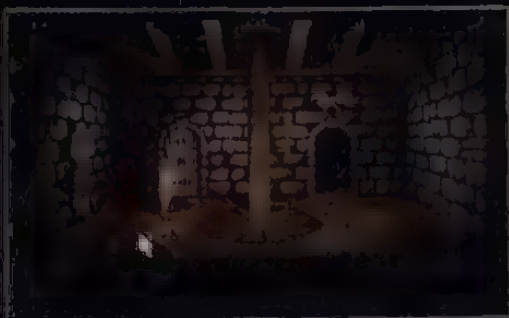


FAMILIAR BROS

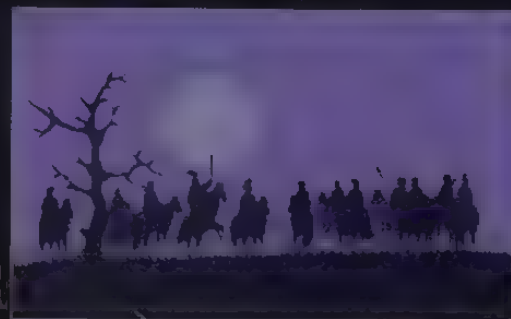
Though the world of *Freedom Fighters* couldn't be further away from the Mushroom Kingdom, IO playfully makes tribute to the *Super Mario* games by casting its lead character as a plumber plunged into a chaotic world. At the start of the game Christopher Stone can even be seen arriving at a job with his noticeably more hirsute brother, Troy. As videogame tradition decrees, Chris is the more dynamic of the two and is called upon to save his hapless brother from the enemy.



The Kingdom was at peace,
after decades of unrest the King had
soothed his quarrelsome subjects. Now,
under his just rule, protected by the sea
and the mountains, the people prospered
and the crops flourished.



As I was riding in the far off town of Turqvale, a beautiful young woman was named Selena; it was a couple very exciting - but far too dangerous! I saddled my pony and made haste to slip away unseen, but the stupid beast had sensed the mounting tension and, despite my protests, the next I knew was were riding with the King's guard!



THE MAKING OF... LURE OF THE TEMPTRESS

Think Revolution Software and you think Broken Sword, but Charles Cecil's point and click love affair began with this unforgettable adventure

FORMAT: AMIGA, ATARI ST, PC PUBLISHER: VIRGIN INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT DEVELOPER: REVOLUTION SOFTWARE UK RELEASE DATE: 1992

As far as UK graphic adventure fans are concerned, Charles Cecil long ago cemented his reputation as a national treasure. Yet while Ron 'Monkey Island' Gilbert and Roberta 'King's Quest' Williams may be point and click royalty, Cecil can at least claim to be heir to the throne. After all, his most famous point and click series - Broken Sword - still thrives (The Angel Of Death's release in 2006 came almost precisely a decade after The Shadow Of The Templars debuted to near-universal acclaim).

Revolution Software's winding road would eventually end at the doorstep of a certain George Stobbart, but Cecil's breakthrough in the genre initially came about thanks to another, far less renowned protagonist - peasant-turned reluctant hero Diemot.

That game was Revolution's first title, 1992's Lure Of The Temptress.

Passionate about historical and conspiratorial lore from a young age, Cecil - like so many pioneering game designers - stumbled into the industry by accident. "I began my career back with the Sinclair ZX81 when I was sponsored as a mechanical

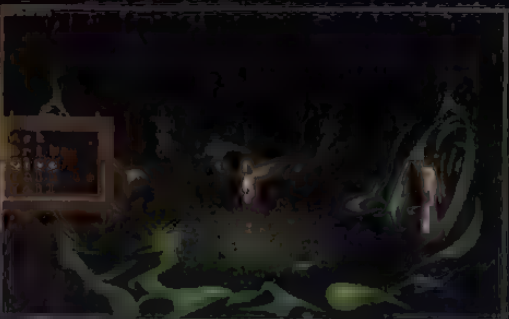
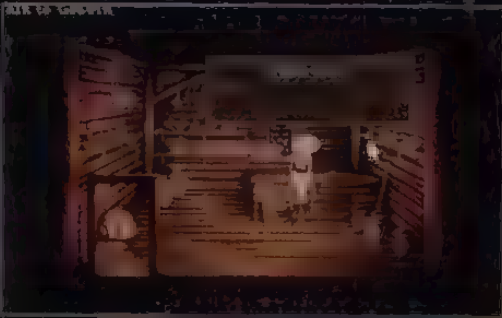
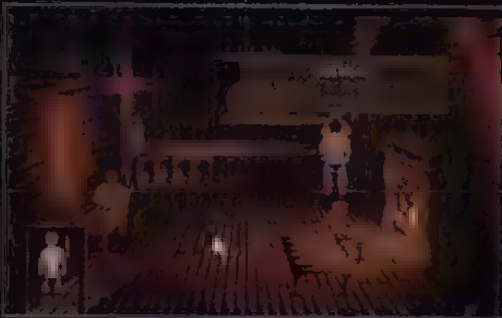
The games industry was extremely young at the time, and many people assumed it was nothing more than a fad that would die out in time, Cecil continues: "I worked at Arctic for a bit, writing text adventures like Inca Curse, Espionage Island [1981] and Ship Of Doom [1982], before moving to US Gold as a

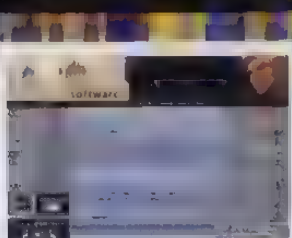
The games industry was extremely young at the time, and many people assumed it was nothing more than a fad that would die out.

engineer by Ford after I left school," he recalls. "A friend of mine had managed to disassemble the ROM for the ZX80 - a very impressive thing to have done, and invaluable for machine code programmers - and he invited me to join his development company, Arctic Computing."

development manager. At the time, the department consisted of two people - myself and a tester.

"In 1988 I was approached to become a manager at Activision, where I had a wonderful couple of years, before the US parent company ran into some difficulties. So, in 1990, I finally





ABANDONWARE ALL HOPE

In direct contradiction to the likes of Sierra and Lucasarts, who take great pains to trawl the internet removing downloadable versions of the likes of *King's Quest* and *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, Revolution has been far more philanthropic when it comes to sharing the fruits of its decade-and-a-half-old labours. Hence, point and click stalwarts will be delighted to learn that both *Lure Of The Temptress* and *Beneath A Steel Sky* can be downloaded, gratis, from revolution.co.uk and played via the freeware graphic adventure emulator SCUMMVM (scummvm.org).

"I have an enormous admiration for SCUMMVM", Cecil enthuses. "Obviously *Lure Of The Temptress* was released in 1992 on DOS. On Windows 98 there was a DOS emulation mode, but with XP and Vista that's pretty much disappeared. *Lure* is a game that's 15 years old, and our view was that without SCUMMVM gamers wouldn't be able to play these titles anyway – so why didn't we just simply give them away? It generated a lot of goodwill, which we were delighted about."

decided to set up Revolution with Tony Warner – with whom I'd worked at Arctic – a friend of his, David Sykes, and Noreen Carmadie, another Activision employee. The four of us started up the company, initially based in Hull – helped out with a £10,000 loan from my mother. Bless her!"

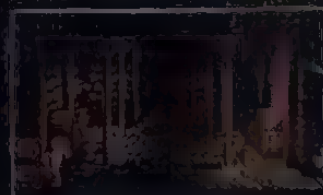
Lure Of The Temptress and the early days of Revolution are linked so deeply as to be virtually indistinguishable. Financing for the project initially came courtesy of Mirrorsoft, a publishing company owned by doomed media tycoon Robert Maxwell and one of the industry's heavy hitters back in the early '90s. *Blasteroids*, *Bloodwych* and a little game called *Tetris* could all be counted among its roster. It was a huge opportunity for the then fledgling Revolution, as Cecil recounts: "Sean Brennon, the then-deputy MD of Mirrorsoft, phoned me up and said: 'We desperately need great product; if you want to set up a studio, we'd definitely support you.'"

At the time, the graphic adventure genre was dominated by Lucasarts and Sierra – yet Cecil reveals he hoped to inject some originality to liven up what he saw as the 'repetition' of series such as *King's Quest* (already up to part VI by the time *Lure* saw

release). "While I enjoyed Sierra games, I felt that there had to be more than yet again saving King Graham of Davenport from a – let's be frank – fairly unlikely series of events. It was all a little bit twee. So we came up with the idea of writing an adventure game that didn't take itself too seriously, but *did* have a serious story – something in-between Lucasarts and Sierra." *Lure* certainly lived up to Cecil's aims, with its fair share of death and the presence of the enchantress Selena's bodyguards – the inhuman, thuggish Skorls.

Nevertheless, Cecil remained cognizant that Revolution was about to enter into perhaps the most competitive genre of its age: established series like *Monkey Island*, *Indiana Jones*, *Police Quest*, *Space Quest* and *Leisure Suit Larry* all successfully weaved high-quality narrative, side-splitting dialogue and complex puzzles. "Oh yes, you had to have an awfully good game with an awfully good script, and very intense gameplay," he recalls.

As far as Cecil was concerned though, laughter remained the key to success. "Humour's a very clever way of creating rhythm, rather than a monotone gameplay pace which can soon grate. Mind you, that rule is not as applicable nowadays as it was back then – advances in technology have made



Although the plot is unashamedly formulaic, there's a distinctly rustic, British feel to *Lure's* oppressed medieval world – and the gruff Short who inhabit it. Diarmot's position as a beater for the king's hunting party only adds to this.

standards of 1992. Nevertheless, Cecil remains proud of his artists' efforts: "Remember that it was also an Atari title, and with the ST we only had 16 colours to work with – meaning we had no choice but to treat the palette very carefully." *Lure* certainly stood the team in good stead, though – its stylistic influences re-emerging in later titles like Revolution's 1996 *pièce de résistance*, *Broken Sword: The Shadow Of The Templars*. "I've always preferred a stylised rather than realistic look," Cecil concurs.

"Clearly we had certain constraints back in 1992 that we don't now," he reasons. "But

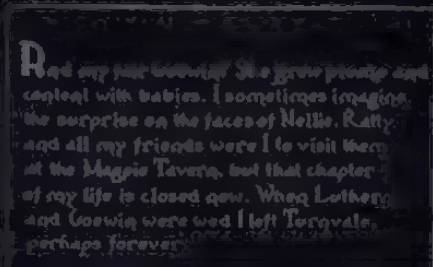
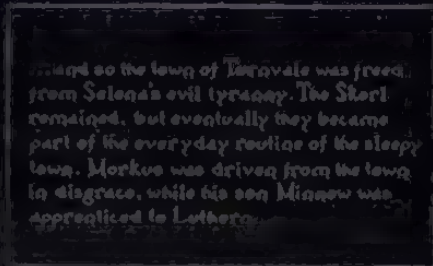
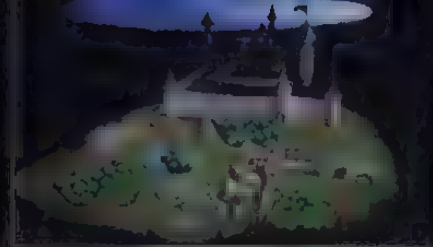
"I felt that there had to be more than yet again saving King Graham of Davenport from a fairly unlikely series of events"

contemporary games more immersive." Not forgetting burgeoning budgets; whereas *Lure* cost a mere £20,000 to make, the third entry in the *Broken Sword* saga, 2003's *The Sleeping Dragon*, came in at a hefty £2 million. Times have certainly changed.

Quality writing in a point and click is a must, especially since *Lure* – with its grimy, medieval palette of browns and greys – isn't a particularly aesthetically pleasing game, even by the murky

often it's useful to look back at those games to understand the way it's possible to create drama simply by juxtaposing complimentary colours, or perhaps framing a picture to make it seem more claustrophobic by darkening the edges. All the techniques we invented because of those constraints are just as valuable today, but developers don't appear to pay much attention to these things now – which I feel is a mistake."





Perhaps reluctant to go toe-to-toe with the genre heavyweights, bringing something new to the genre was always important to Revolution. Enter the proprietary Virtual Theatre engine, allowing in-game characters to wander around the game world independently of one another, living – to some extent at least – their own lives. Graphic adventure fans would later decry having to chase absconding peasants through the game's rabbit warren environments in order to interact with them, though Cecil recalls a different reception – critically at least: "I remember when we presented for the first time at ECTS a number of journalists came and people were just blown away – they actually stood up and applauded. I felt very proud".

Another novel feature of the Virtual Theatre allowed players to give orders to 'helper' characters – Lure fans will no doubt remember Diernot's faithful jester sidekick, Ratpouch – who would then scurry off to perform the task. Why is it that Revolution's riff on living, breathing worlds failed to make it into any future adventures?

"In a game like *Lure* I think it worked pretty well", Cecil acquiesces. "Unfortunately, it seemed less applicable in *Beneath*

A Steel Sky, as the ability to issue commands conflicted with the gameplay we intended to create. *Lure* had one story that was moved forward by a key event – *Steel Sky* had multiple threads. In one way that presented us with exciting gameplay opportunities, but in others it cordoned off more ambitious ideas in terms of multilinearity".

Perhaps, in retrospect, the most unintentionally celebrated aspect of *Lure Of The Temptress* is its frankly bizarre title, an issue that still elicits a wry smile from Cecil even today. "As the project was nearing completion, we started brainstorming for titles – coming up with a lot of rubbish names that were never intended to stick. Then, after pressure from the marketing department we, as a joke, put forth '*Lure Of The Temptress*'".

And of course, the marketing department loved it. "I responded: 'OK, but there's no luring and there's no temptress,'" says Cecil. Their response? "Oh, couldn't you put one in?" So we had to actually change the design document to fit the name that Mirrorsoft decided they liked. The happy ending is that I've no doubt the game was a lot better because of it!" Quizzed as to who your nemesis actually was prior to the

introduction of the young and beautiful enchantress Selina, Cecil mutters an embarrassed: "I really don't remember!"

One conundrum endures: how come *Lure*, which basically owed its entire existence to Mirrorsoft, eventually ended up being published by Virgin Interactive Entertainment? "Robert Maxwell fell off his yacht," quips Cecil. "Then Mirrorsoft, this powerhouse of a company, went into receivership overnight. It was quite extraordinary. We were actually very lucky that *Lure* hadn't been published, as when Mirrorsoft went into receivership, our contract was effectively terminated. Luckily, Virgin invited us to move our games to them."

Lure's solid if unspectacular critical and commercial response cemented Revolution's burgeoning reputation, resulting in Virgin investing time and money in the fledgling company. "It enabled us to move to York, which is what we always wanted to do, but also made me feel very guilty because Hull had been very welcoming to us. Alas, the problem with Hull is that nobody wanted to go there. It was very difficult place to run a company," recalls Cecil.

Having now been overshadowed by nearly all of Revolution's subsequent releases – and indeed, in the interim he himself has deemed point and click games to be 'dead' – Cecil insists that *Lure* and co have left their own unique legacy in the point and click pantheon: "To be honest with you, in the context of adventures, I think most of them seem to have taken a leaf out of our book".

With ensuing graphic adventures including the likes of *Darkness Within*; *In Pursuit Of*; *Loath Nolder*; *The Bizarre Adventures Of Woodruff And The Schnibble* and *Freddy Pharkas*; *Frontier Pharmacist* rival developers certainly haven't been afraid to take *Lure's* lead on the nonsensical title front.

...and so the town of Torgvale was freed from Selena's evil tyranny. The Sherk remained, but eventually they became part of the everyday routine of the sleepy town. Morkus was driven from the town in disgrace, while his son Minnow was apprenticed to Luther.

Red my hair brown! She grew proud and content with babies. I sometimes imagine the surprise on the faces of Nellie, Ratty, and all my friends were I to visit them at the Maggie Tavern, but that chapter of my life is closed now. When Luther and Goswin were wed I left Torgvale, perhaps forever.

Ten years of Havok

The middleware business is a tough game, as proved by the potted history of Irish physics company Havok



David O'Meara, CEO, Havok



David Gargan, one of Havok's original engineers

One of Havok's earliest successes was getting its physics technology into Autodesk's (then Discreet's) 3ds Max product as the plug-in Reactor. New components in Havok 6's summer release will be the Cloth and Destruction tech.



If dog years are worth seven or eight human ones, how do the years of a middleware company correspond? It's more than just an idle thought, as one of the sector's most mature vendors, Irish physics specialist Havok, prepares to notch up a decade (a lifetime?) in the business.

Founded by **Steve Collins** and **Hugh Reynolds**, two academics from Trinity College, Dublin, Havok was originally spun out of publicly funded research into the rather clunkily entitled subject of Real-time Physically-Based Animation for Educational Multimedia. As Collins noted: "At the time, games was not a valid academic term."

Back then, the landscape was very different. PCs remained the most technologically advanced platform and although PlayStation 2 had been announced, Xbox remained a twinkle in the eyes of Seamus Blackley and Kevin Bacchus. The implications of cross-platform middleware, if considered, weren't properly understood. Still, Havok got up to speed quickly, at least on the business side, buying up and merging with German competitor Igon and fighting off the challenge of UK rival

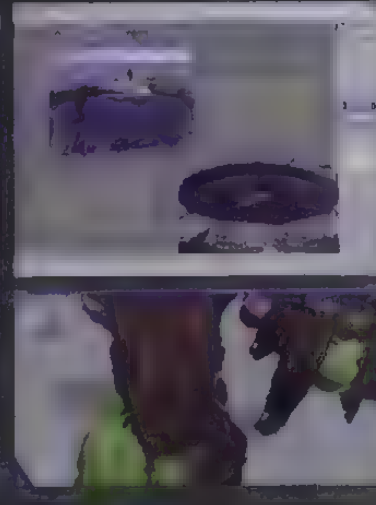
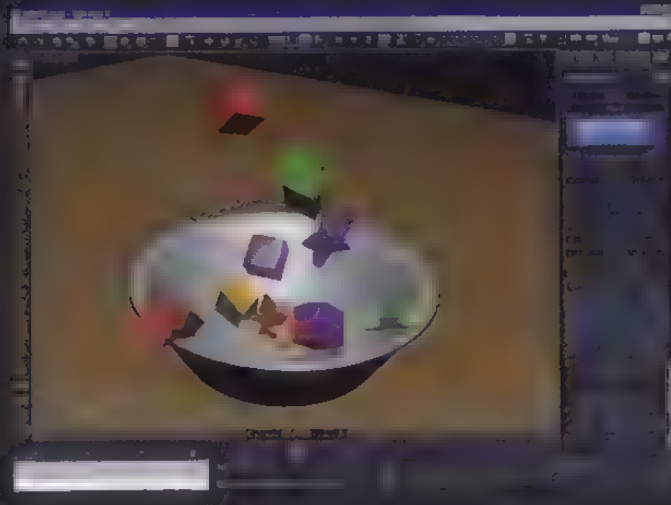
MathEngine, which was eventually bought out by Criterion.

"I think it took about seven years for us to become a successful company," ponders Havok's CEO **David O'Meara**, who has been with the company for around half its existence, as well as overseeing last year's acquisition of the firm by Intel.

It's a long-term view that fits within the anecdotal argument that it's not until a middleware company releases the third version of its technology that it fully understands what it's trying to do and what the market wants, and hence actually begins to make some money. For relevant examples, think Criterion's RenderWare and Epic's Unreal Engine for the Maya art package.

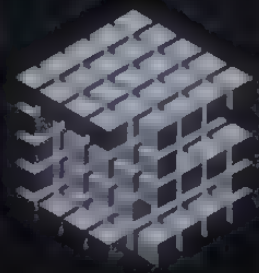
David Gargan, one of Havok's original engineers, agrees with this. "Havok 1 was a pain, and the transition to Havok 2, while making the product more optimal for PlayStation 2, was horrible, too," he recalls. "It wasn't until Havok 3, when we'd cracked continuous collision detection and made the product robust that things started to take off."

According to O'Meara, the size of the company and resources it takes to get





The second generation of game physics was ragdoll dynamics (left), which basically boiled down to death animations. One of the traditional elements of Havok's technology has been enabling developers to model the behaviour of a large number of exploding blocks.



to this point offered customers another vital type of validation. "Alongside the product being robust, you've also got to prove to the EAs and Activisions you're financially viable too," he says. In that respect, signing up with Valve and *Half-Life 2* [eventually released in November 2004] was significant. People could see physics was going to be important in games. Although even when people tried to do it in-house, so it took another couple of years to overcome that.

Yet it was perhaps only with the arrival of PlayStation 3 that Havok really demonstrated its technical power. It was the first company to get its tech working well on across the Cell's multiple Synergistic Processing Units; something few other middleware companies, or developers, have matched.

Indeed, the talk on the grapevine is that this ability to successfully apply gaming software to exotic hardware was one of the reasons Intel, a company that had been tracking Havok for a number of years, decided to make O'Meara and Havok's venture capital investors an offer they couldn't refuse. In this context, it's well known that Larrabee, Intel's next

generation of graphics architecture, will use a complex configuration involving dozens of co-processors.

Six months on from the acquisition, O'Meara won't be drawn on specifics but argues Havok was more than just a technical purchase. "One clear objective Intel was interested in was the credibility we have in the games space," he says. "Intel doesn't have that credibility or those customer relationships. Another



"The fact is 90 per cent of customers buy Havok because we're cross-platform. That's not going to change"

reason was that Intel's CEO, Paul Otellini, wants to show Intel can work as a corporation which has subsidiaries that are independent and operate at arm's length. Intel is a very structured company with tens of thousands of people operating fab plants. That's its mindset and that's one of the reasons it wasn't successful in games."

So in the short-term at least, it remains business as usual. Sure there's been a big shake-up in the game physics

space with Havok's competitor Ageia being bought by Nvidia, but O'Meara says Havok will only prosper if it treats Nvidia's, AMD's and IBM's silicon the same as it treats Intel's.

"Havok will survive on its cross-platform prowess," he states. "Sure, Intel is terribly important but it always was terribly important. So are Sony's consoles and Microsoft's. The fact is 90 per cent of our customers buy Havok

because we're cross-platform. That's not going to change."

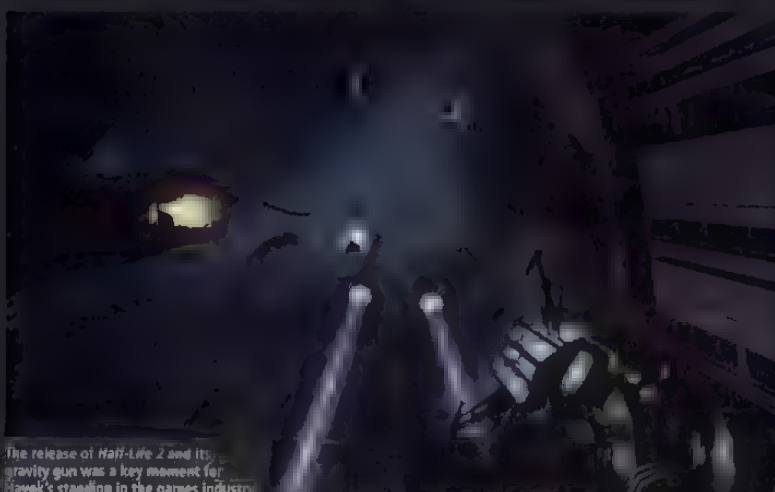
This philosophy is underlined by Havok's ongoing release schedule. Currently, developers can buy various configurations of its default Havok Physics engine, the Havok Animation engine and the Havok Behaviour animation pipeline, all of which are at version 5.5 status. At this year's Game Developers Conference, the company was demonstrating its big summer additions for Havok 6, Havok Cloth and Havok Destruction, which respectively focus on creating character garments and environmental cloth, and breaking and deforming objects into smaller pieces.

It all sounds broadly reminiscent of something then-CTO Steve Collins said back in 2002: "The biggest challenge always has been and probably always will be delivering solutions that work for the developer, that integrate easily into their toolchain, don't require extensive training and which squeeze the best performance out of the target platform. This is true of any middleware. It's not very exciting, but it's what makes the difference between a technology and a solution."

Or the difference between a middleware failure or success.

A Havok Timeline

- 1996: Havok makes its original application to Epic game Ireland
- 1998: The company formally sets up with seven staff
- 2000: Staff number rises to 35. First public showing of the technology at London's ECTS. Havok buys German physics company Igon, which is known for its vehicle dynamics. Havok technology licensed to Valve
- 2001: Havok v1.5 previewed at ECTS. Total number of clients hits 35. A rigid-body SDK called Havok Hardcore is released. It's noted to cost less than an IP lawyer on one contract or dropping two laser-guided 2,000lb bombs. Havok's technology - called Reactor - is included within the *Warhammer* Director 8.5 (Shiny Entertainment) and *Discreet's* *3ds Max*
- 2002: Havok raises \$7 million in its first major round of venture capital funding
- 2003: Havok 2.0 released
- 2004: A further round of private equity funding is raised. Havok adds its 100th and 101st game titles, with Vivendi and Shiny signing up Valve's *Half-Life 2* to be released
- 2005: Havok FX, an environment physics technology designed to work on GPUs is announced
- 2006: The Havok headcount hits 100, with the majority of staff based in San Francisco. Most R&D remains in Dublin, Ireland, with other offices in Japan and India. Havok 4, including Havok Behaviour, is released
- 2007: Havok is bought by Intel for an undisclosed sum. Havok 5 is released
- 2008: Havok 6, including Cloth and Destruction components, released



The release of *Half-Life 2* and its gravity gun was a key moment for Havok's standing in the games industry.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ COMPANY NAME: Cohort Studios

■ DATE FOUNDED: February 2006

■ NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 38

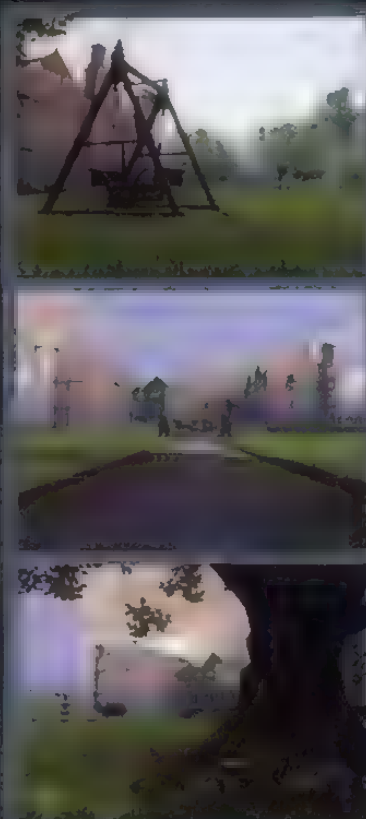
■ KEY STAFF: In a small studio, all staff are key



■ URL: www.cohortstudios.com

■ SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY

Go! Puzzle (PS3), Buzz! Junior: Lina Dan (PS2)



Cohort has admitted it shies away from the limelight and get on with what they are good at



■ LOCATION:
Dundee, Scotland

■ CURRENT PROJECTS:

Unannounced PlayStation 2 and PlayStation 3 titles

■ ABOUT THE STUDIO

Cohort Studios Ltd was formed with the ambition of building a studio that excels in quality, but also strikes an essential work-life balance for its talented team members. Holding to these principles, Cohort's expansion continues with a doubling in size since its formation in early 2006, along with relocation to new digital media offices in the centre of Dundee, which has become the hub for games development in Scotland.

The company initially assisted as an extra resource on *MotorStorm 10* for PlayStation 3, following this, it commenced work on *Go! Puzzle* for the PlayStation

Network, and recently completed *Buzz! Junior: Lina Dan*.

The company's ethos is based around its CREATE philosophy which gives all team members the framework to be creative and contribute their own unique perspective and ideas to projects. Cohort strongly believes that content is key, and that to create great content requires a great team in which people are respected for their own abilities and allowed to grow and thrive in a creative culture. The focus is on the experience rather than the technology, and the whole company focuses its skills in maximising this entertainment experience.



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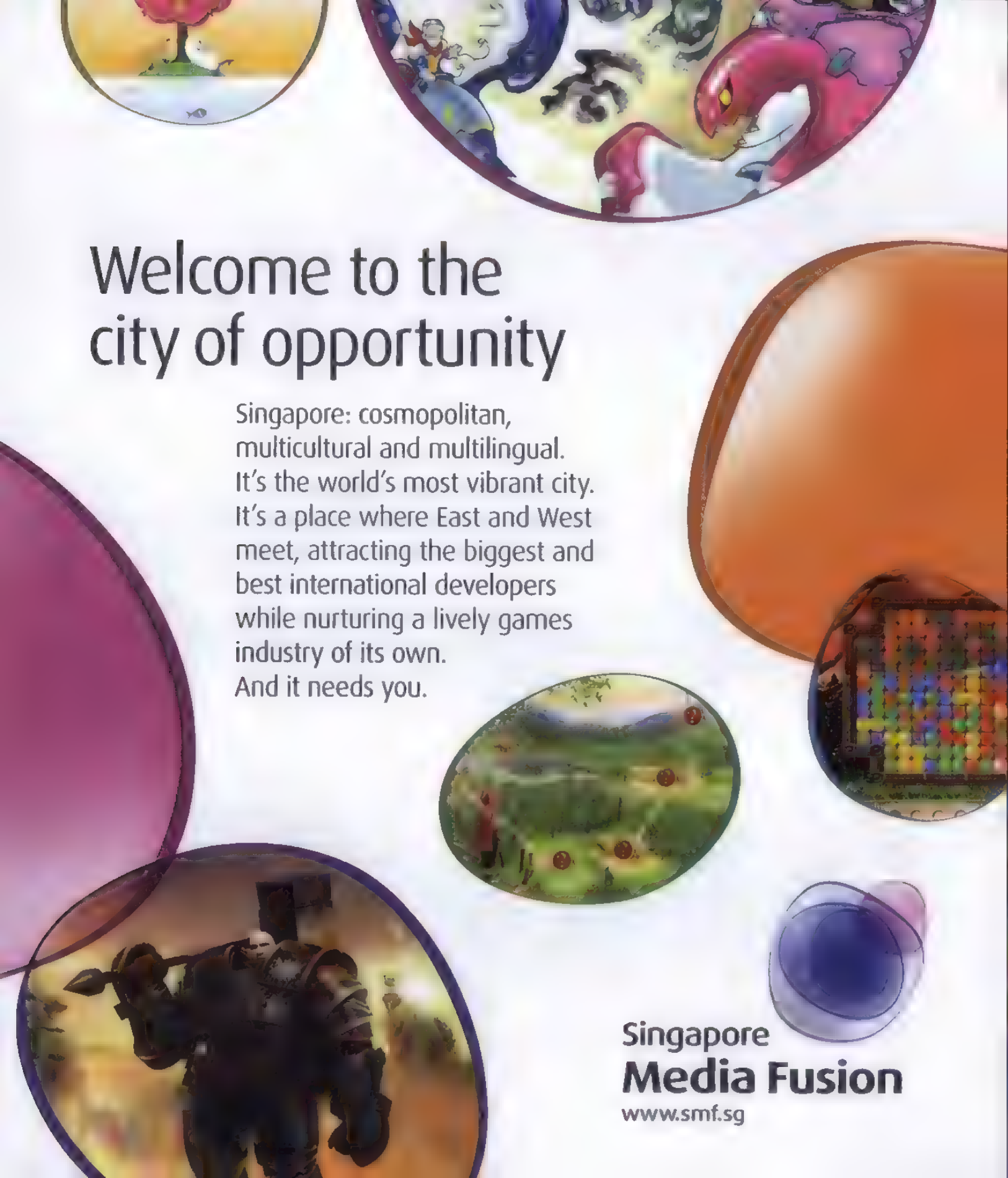
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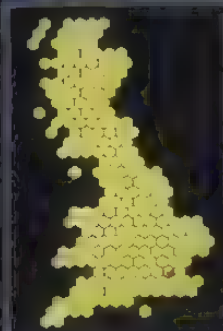
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■ NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 23,000

■ URL: www.sol.city.ac.uk

■ CONTACT: gganquire@sol.city.ac.uk 020 7040 0245



■ COURSES OFFERED:

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 BSc (Hons) computer science with games technology
 BSc (Hons) computer science with music technology

■ KEY STAFF

Andrew Tuson, head of department, computing; Chris Child, lecturer,

lecturer, computing

■ FROM A GAME, TO A CAREER



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"I have always had a passion for videogames, yet was at a loss as to how I could carve out a career in this notoriously competitive industry. I was impressed by City University London's high employment rate and the BSc in computer science with games technology, so decided to apply.

After studying on the course, I have already gained insight into all aspects of computing, as well as the skills to get my foot in the door of the games industry. The university even helped me find a six-month placement with a successful London-based games development house. Here, I was given personal tuition on games programming

(gameplay and tools) and involved in design meetings, where my ideas were included in the games. I was then put into a small team to develop an MMO's lead programmer.

This was a hugely rewarding and valuable experience that I am sure will help me secure a job once I've completed my degree. In fact, my placement company has already asked if I'll come back and work there full-time.

All in all, City University London has been a fantastic resource for me, for knowledge, support and a degree that the growing games industry takes notice of!



Computing lecturer Chris Child

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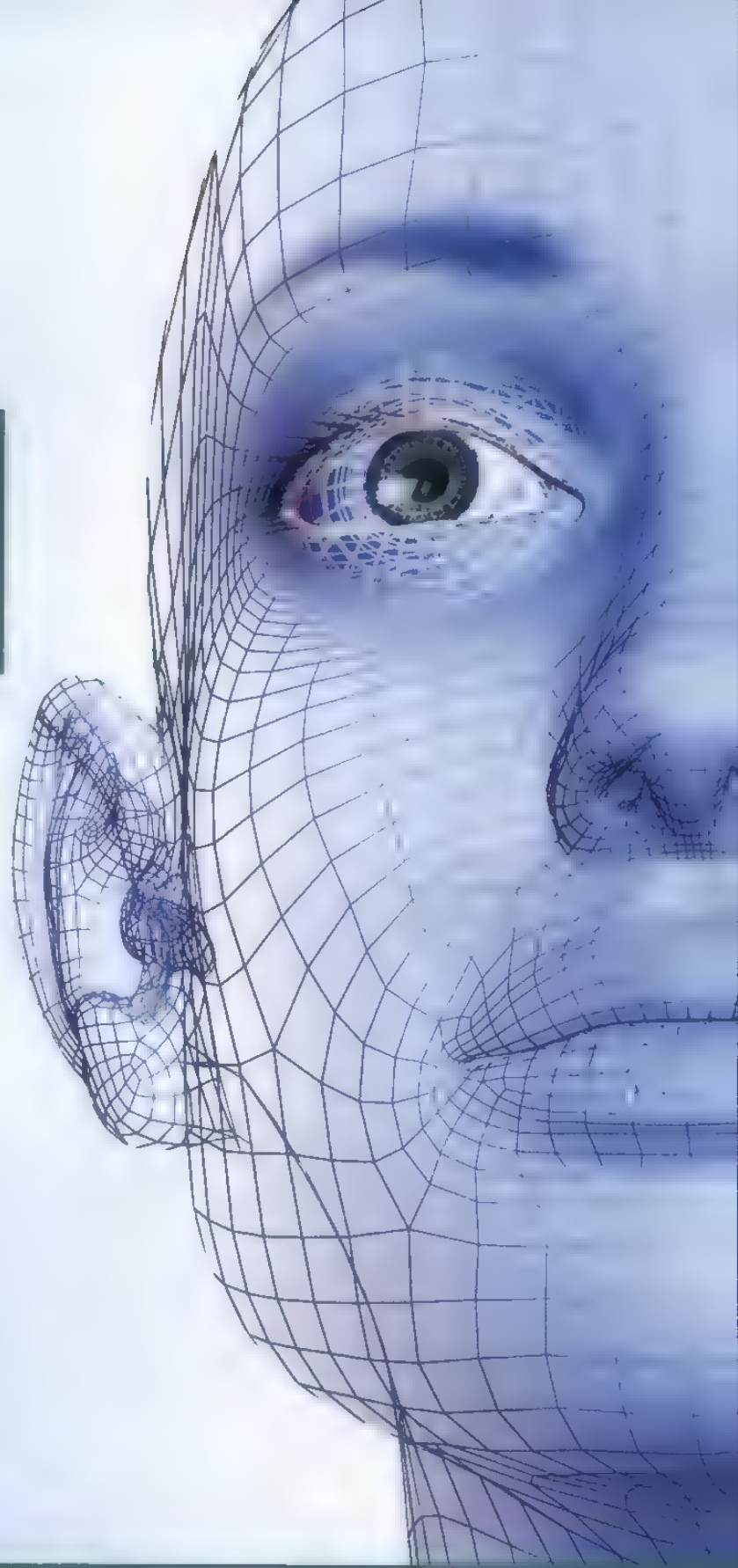
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BY N'GAL CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK because people refuse to see

As I've said before elsewhere, I'm a relative newcomer to videogames, having only dedicated myself seriously to the medium – both as a journalist and as a player – since 1999. One of the more important parts of my education was *Madden NFL Football*. I'd seen other people playing it, at friends' places or industry events, but as a newcomer to games and a mere casual follower of the actual sport, it had always looked daunting. But with the autumn 2000 release of the PS2, and precious little to show off Sony's black obelisk to best advantage, I decided to throw myself into its killer app: *Madden NFL 2001*.

It turned out that the game was as daunting as it had previously appeared, but at the easiest level, there was some much-needed hand holding. There was an option to select plays by the position of the player you wanted to get the ball to, rather than by such impenetrable arcana

tried to return to it in recent years, I haven't been able to bring myself to do the work – and make no mistake, it is work – to scale the learning curve. My older, more casual self feels that *Madden* isn't easy to learn and difficult to master; it's actually off-putting to learn and easy to forget. So when I sat down to dinner late last year with Electronic Arts CEO John Riccitiello (yes, I've mentioned him two months in a row, but bear with me), and we began discussing how videogames could be made even more accessible to a wider audience, I related the above anecdote and then asked him: "What's the equivalent of three frets for *Madden*?"

As readers of this column know, I'm rather obsessed with *Rock Band*, much as I was with its predecessor, *Guitar Hero*. Part of the genius of the game is that the guitar interface itself is simplified on the lower difficulty settings: only three frets are required for easy, four for

a metaphor, the entire videogame industry could stand to apply this across the board. What's the equivalent of three frets for franchises like *Call Of Duty*, *Final Fantasy* or *Grand Theft Auto*? Because when I look at videogames from this perspective, I realise how much all difficulty settings – from easy/novice to expert/veteran – are ultimately designed with core gamers in mind, as if all gamers were some fraction of the ideally skilled gamer. Part of the reason the Wii has been such a revelation is that it has managed to break through the interface barrier – and companies like EA have responded with radically simplified family play options for sports titles and an on-rails mode for the most recent version of *Medal Of Honor Heroes*. Yet little of this thinking seems to have made its way to the Xbox 360, PS3 or PC.

Progression and reward systems could similarly use a reboot with the non-core gamer in mind. As much as I like *Rock Band*, it was a mistake to set a cap on the number of fans players can win over and venues players can unlock on a per-difficulty setting basis. They should trust the player to determine his or her desired challenge, and not penalise them or force them to step it up. Even death/failure states and retrying should be rethought, because of how off-putting they likely are to people who don't have an extensive gaming vocabulary. What if, instead of death or failure, a game instead paused the action just before the moment of defeat; rewound the action like a VCR or *Prince of Persia* until players were out of harm's way, and then positively encouraged them to keep going? What if more developers designed a separate non-core experience on top of the same art assets, levels and narrative, and included both on the same disc? The Age of Three Frets is upon us. Carpe ludio.

N'Gal Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog, can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup.

Videogames' visual appeal has increased to the point where it can actually be entertaining to watch someone else play a game

as I-Form, Split Backs or Weak I. Even better, you could hit a button and John Madden himself would tell you which play to choose. By such means – and each release of *Madden* for three consecutive years – I not only turned myself into an effective *Madden* player, I also gained a much greater understanding of real-life football when I was watching it on television or from the stands at the Super Bowl (that's another story, for another day.) By year three, I had graduated to the game-within-the-game of pre-snap adjustments – tweaking my hot routes, shifting my linemen and calling audibles – that felt like a burst of speed chess before the football.

For no particular reason, I stopped playing *Madden* seriously after 2002. And any time I've

medium, five for hard and expert. As videogames have improved graphically, their visual appeal has increased as well, to the point where it can actually be entertaining for gamers and non-gamers alike to watch someone else play a game. But how many times have we core gamers – we who are best positioned to lure non-gamers into the ecstasies of our medium of choice – declined to pass the controller because we know that said non-gamer will not be able to break through the interface barrier and find the fun? Not so with *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band*. I'm always on tenterhooks whenever I put the guitar in a non-gamer's hands, but without fail, on easy, they're all in by track three.

That's particular to this type of game, but as



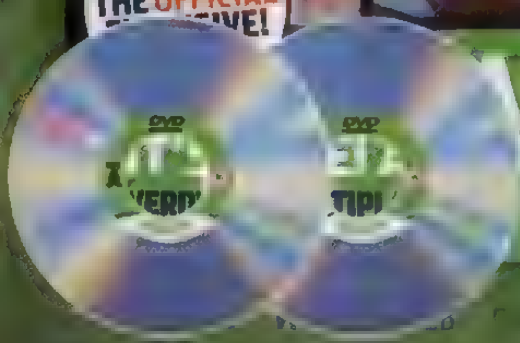
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HI, I'M RANDY

THE TYRANNY OF FUN, AND OF LORD BLACKTHORN

Am I the only one who gets really worked up about the fact that choice and consequence are out of vogue? Back in the era of, say, *Ultima V* (I wasn't cool enough for *IV*), you could create a brand new, cherub-faced little avatar and send him off into the wilds with a pat on his diapered butt, and moments later his pudgy dismembered limbs would be trailing blood in a majestic arc through the sky after he foolishly abandoned the comforts of Britain and marched straight into the mountain pass of Serpent's Spine, or the lower two-thirds of his body would rot away from gangrene when he learned the hard way about splashing through swamps without proper footwear, or he would be dragged gurgling into the frigid depths by a mass of ropey tentacles when his dainty white skiff ran afoul of river currents and drifted out to sea. Hell yeah! Those were the days!

How can we make a game about something personal and organic, like human relationships, if we insist on goals and scores?

What's more, *Ultima V* had a 50-page manual that didn't teach you how to play the game. It afforded crucial tips like "Britannia has undergone a great transformation from totalitarian monarchy to representative democracy," and "the newly risen moon, Trammel, is in its Gibbous Waxing phase," and "slimes carry no booty". But, after playing through the introduction, there you were holding a dagger and a cloth map with a teeming, jester-infested world sprawled out unhelpfully before you. Who would point you to glorious victory and amassment of booty? How would you make progress? Progress on what? The petty tyrant Lord Blackthorn, who hated freedom, advertised no vulnerabilities

Ultima V didn't have a score. You were on your own in evaluating your collected resources against the challenges and opportunities you confronted. You could release prisoners from jail when they begged you, and you could take crops from fields when you were starving, and you could feel really vague about whether these were jolly good ideas or ghastly, staggering blunders.

Today, this sort of thing is considered bad and wrong, and we've developed some of our most sophisticated design around preventing it. To keep players from encountering dangers beyond their ability to cope, there are elaborately gated physical paths and aggressive dynamic difficulty adjustment strategies. To keep players informed and on the right track, we have clear objectives with unambiguous, visible closure conditions. To tell players whether they are playing well or badly, we rate every action and encourage them to get a perfect score. To

balance risk and reward, we create complex spreadsheets from which we derive treasure tables and graphs of experience points.

Why do we do all this? Because games are supposed to be fun, and fun only happens when you are pointed directly towards it, when it's neither too easy nor too hard to get, and when you're told 'good job' upon acquiring it. We've brilliantly succeeded in eliminating the interstitials, stripping away everything but fun.

But as art, games carry messages, so let's compare. *Ultima V* teaches you that it's a harsh but beautiful world. That your actions will have consequences. That you won't be rewarded fairly every time. That you can't always tell right from wrong. That you have to make your

own goals and decisions. Does this remind you of a non-virtual universe in which you participate? Modern games, by contrast, teach us things like it doesn't really matter which way you choose to go. That someone will always watch over you and check you're OK. That there is an omniscient judge of your behaviour who is generous with this information. That you should do what you're told and get really good at it.

Sure, I'm overstating a bit, but I worry that in the course of evolution we created a philosophical divide with exploration, choice, and consequence on one side and goals, scores, and balance on the other. I'm not sure the two sides are equally vital for producing unique, relevant works. Are we so hooked on the escapist fantasy of an uncomplicated life, of reverting to the safety of childhood, that no other games should be made? Have we explored alternatives? How can we make a game about something personal and organic, like human relationships, if we insist on goals and scores? What kind of relationships would we portray?

And what's with fun? *Schindler's List* is a valuable film, but it's not especially fun. I've heard it said the best rock music is about longing and loss, which in my experience kind of sucks. How did we become the artform that absolutely has to be all about fun? Remember when graphic novels were all about superheroes and cartoon animals? Was that so great?

Ultima V's final message is that if you're a good person, keep trying, and learn from your mistakes, you'll eventually depose that jackass pretender Lord Blackthorn. If corrected for modern standards, you'd probably learn that thinking for yourself is questionable and that you'll be told the right way to do things. But you'd still depose Blackthorn. Wouldn't you?

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg.



TAME THE ELEMENTS

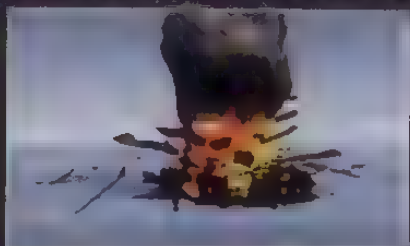
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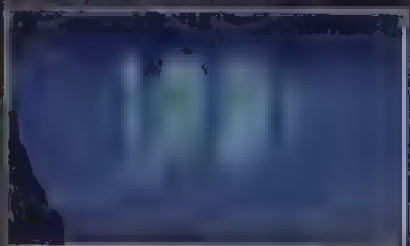
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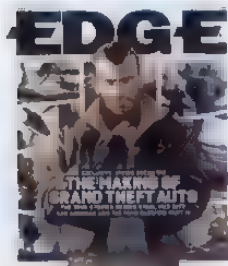


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Issue 187

ONLINE OFFLINE

A bundle of snips from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic over milked gaming cows

Most of the supposedly great games coming out this year are great examples of supremely milked franchises – but do we gamers even care about that?

It's not a case of which ones have been milked too much, more a case of which ones were milked incorrectly. I doubt that many people on this forum would claim that Mario has been over-milked, despite the fact that he's appeared in as many games as the words 'game over'. *Galaxy* proved that if done correctly there's life in the old dog yet.

Objection!!!
NALL

Mario has been over-milked in that he has been stamped over games like a corporate logo. Tennis, football, golf, party – he's the selling point on otherwise mediocre IP. It's as if Mickey Mouse appeared in every Disney movie.

11/06/06 10:11

I read your feature on the Xbox 360's future prospects with great interest, recalling your similar feature on the original Xbox some five years ago. One of your main points is that Microsoft's 'non-gamer' titles are rather thin on the ground, with *Viva Piñata* and the various Live Arcade puzzlers in particular getting a bit past it. This is hard to argue with, but it's occurred to me that a couple of other consoles have the same problem – consoles which really can't afford to.

I'm talking about the Wii and DS, of

wants non-gamers buying these, it's certainly not been quick to make them attractive in advertisements ("So, you're in a cartoon?"). This year gives us *Smash Brothers*, *No More Heroes*, *Mario Kart* and the like, familiar enough to gamers but hardly easy entry points, with only *Wii Fit*, scarcely a game at all, chasing the new-gamer buck. The thirdparty situation is just as bad.

The big threat with targeting the non-gamer market is that the product will be seen as a novelty, and fail to lead people into a serious game-buying,



By failing to provide a variety of new non-gamer titles on a regular basis, Nintendo runs the risk of falling by the wayside when tastes change

course. Nintendo's new-gamer Wii vanguard is still composed of *Wii Sports* and *Wii Play*, and the prospects of new gamers downloading simpler, old-school titles from WiiWare or the Virtual Console are rather slim given how few Wiis I've seen actually connected to the internet. (Nintendo and Microsoft were quick to release figures for the percentage of DSes, Xboxes and 360s which have gone online – one has to wonder what the numbers are for Wii.) Likewise, Nintendo's big Mother's Day release this year is a DS starter pack with *Brain Training*. Not even *More Brain Training* – this is the original, 18-month-old title. *Animal Crossing* and *Nintendogs* are still going strong in Nintendo's marketing efforts, as are the smattering of 'training' titles.

Aside from these hardy perennials, Nintendo seems loath to release non-gamer titles. The firstparty Wii schedule for the past year has mostly been 'gamer games' such as *Mario Galaxy* and *Metroid Prime 3*. If Nintendo

game-playing habit. This is a difficult thing to achieve, to be sure, and Nintendo can hardly be criticised for failing to get there in a single bound. However, by failing to provide a variety of new non-gamer titles on a regular basis, Nintendo runs the risk of falling by the wayside when tastes change. Microsoft and Sony can afford to dabble in a new market with 'normal gamers' to fall back on. The only way is up, after all. If Nintendo fails to capitalise on the non-gamer market in the long run, it's not clear where it can go.

Of course, as an increasingly busy gamer myself, I'm just a little bit frustrated that my pick-up-and-play options are still limited to games from 2006, so I could just be venting.

Alex W.

If there's anything that Nintendo is perennially accused of, it's that it doesn't make enough heavyweight games – perhaps less a mark of its release schedule being too sparse than the fact that we can't get enough of a

good thing. But *Mario Galaxy*, *Smash Bros* and *Mario Kart* arguably provide more accessible play than many established series in videogames. As such, it's probably not helpful to divide games into 'serious' and 'non-gamer' brackets – everyone enjoys *Wii Sports*, don't they? And shouldn't people new to games be encouraged to try *Galaxy*? Anyway, we'll add to your problems by sending a DS Lite, perhaps for playing some old Touch Generations titles.

I must admit to sitting with a wry smile at the news filtering through about the sales problems of Sony's PS3, with one simple phrase playing in my head: what goes around comes around. As a long-time gamer (I have every platform from the Mega Drive/Amiga 500/Atari ST era up), it simply amazes me that Sony, after effectively seeing off Sega, Commodore, Atari, 3DO and Philips, didn't actually understand why they had seen them off!

Allow me to present the three laws of game machines. First law: price is key. Second law: quality gaming is critical. Third law: people want a games machine to be a games machine, they don't necessarily want something all singing, all dancing – especially if it affects laws one and two.

Sony has broken all three laws

with the PS3, and this is why it's struggling. 3DO broke law one, and look what happened to that. Atari and Commodore broke law two with the Jaguar and CD32, and look what happened to them. Philips broke law three with the CD-i, and look what happened to that.

There are also two sub-laws: get the marketing right (all the above, especially Atari) and – the one that broke Sega – get the backward compatibility factored in so your users don't feel betrayed. The PS3 is an amazing technical triumph, there is no doubt. But I won't buy one until I feel I need it, and even with the recent massive price cuts, right now... I just don't think I do.

Darren Smithson

Sony would probably argue that it's well aware of your first two laws, and has learned some valuable lessons since PS3's launch. As for your third law, no

I've never cried so much. I am not sure what moved me more, my father's return, or the knowledge that I would only ever intermittently return to Hyrule

modern console is purely a gaming device, is it? (And don't forget that much of the early PS2 success was attributed to its ability to play DVD movies.) Irrespective of all that, Sony's brand is a more powerful one in gaming than any of the others you mention

(even at the height of their relative powers), and it's this sort of wildcard that tends to screw with laws, so it's probably a tiny bit rash to lump it in with the likes of dear old 3DO

Even as a 14-year-old, I knew that my love of games wasn't just some childish thing I would grow out of. But even now, in the days of girls playing *SingStar* and Wii, and more and more ageing gamers like myself, there is still a tiny part of me that gets embarrassed if I am caught reading gaming websites at work.

In your last issue, Liam Kelly wrote something that I have thought for years – that games are about the pure pleasure of being in their world. I can remember all the seminal gaming moments in my life. I remember the day my friends and I got all the stars in *Mario 64*, and when my father came out of hospital following a heart operation the same day I completed

Ocarina Of Time. I've never cried so much in my life since (to this day I am not sure what moved me more, my father's return, or the knowledge that I would only ever intermittently return to Hyrule). The list could go on forever. Like when you smell something that



Also received this month: a photograph of a somewhat familiar-looking cloud from *Edge* reader Patrick Graham. We await further, similarly authentic images of tea-leaf arrangements and so on



Topic: Welcome Stranger

Any game worth a dime has a shop, and you can bet your bottom dollar a shop's gotta have a shopkeeper. So which in-game shop gives the best bang for your buck service-wise? Pound for pound, which are the most memorable moments of virtual spending?

COIN

No mentions of shops in videogames can go without the classic encounter with the *Link's Awakening* shop keeper. The original *Zelda* shop keeper was quite rude: "BUY SOMETHIN' WILL YA!"

COIN

The Tomato Convenience Store in *Shenmue*. Certain purchases gave you a shot at a lucky dip prize. I wasted lots of Ine-San's allowance every day, driven on in the hope I'd secure the Saturn games. The in-store music is still stuck in my head.

COIN

Tom Nook, the bastard. Making you work in the shop and not even offering you an employee discount. Plus his tetchy 'yes, yes' when you don't buy the stuff he shows you. And he follows you around the shop like you're some kind of shoplifter.

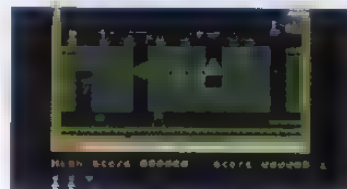
COIN

The Zora shopkeeper in *Ocarina Of Time*. I think I liked him mainly because it seemed like a really strange, but cool place to set up shop. Okay, he may not get the sales the other places do, but he was happy. Probably.

COIN

What's wrong with these shop keepers setting up business in areas they have no customers? I think the worst was the weirdo who set up shop inside a pipe that only babies can access in that *Mario & Luigi DS* game. Even worse, he only accepted seeds for payment, though, to be fair, I don't think he was quite right in the head.

COIN



As he bids farewell to Mr Biffo, Nic Hill laments how rarely he gets the sort of buzz that a *Manic Miner* session would deliver

triggers a childhood memory, when I return to these games I return to those moments.

Gaming has changed in so many ways since I started, but the reason I play has not changed: the thrill, the adventure and the sheer dumbness of it, and I hope that I will continue till the day I die. I suppose the point of this letter is that I shouldn't care what other people think of my hobby, whether it is art or a waste of time, because it means more to me than anyone else will know.

Anand Modha

It's with some dismay that I've just read (E187) that Mr Biffo has hung up his stylus for *Edge*. I've been reading *Edge* for many years now and this is the first time that I've put my pixel to panel.

I've truly enjoyed Mr Biffo's column as it has hit so many chords (and dischords) with how I also feel about the gaming industry. I was weaned on the ZX80 games (many we had to type in ourselves!) to the latest powerhouses, and I've felt very similar to the sentiments that Mr Biffo has raised. Only recently have I enjoyed the exuberance I used to feel when getting a new game home, loading it up, having my tea, checking on the computer, finding it crashed, reloaded, out for a game of footy, coming back in to find *Manic Miner* had loaded (and what a sweet game that was at the time – I can still hear In the Hall of the Mountain King as I write). The exuberance I feel refers to *Oblivion*. I know I'm late on this one, but I've only just found the time to play it, and it truly is excellent (shame I'll never finish that MBA dissertation – don't tell the wife)

I could go into how the latest games are so large (and they must be good to justify £50), that I just don't seem to

get the time to scratch the surface of most games (unless it hooks me early, such as *Call Of Duty*); however, I really just wanted to thank Biffo for all his most enjoyable columns. So to avoid further rambling, I'd like to wish Mr Biffo my warmest wishes and hope that he enjoys his next assignment.

Nic Hill

I've just read the games-to-movie article in E186. I've watched quite a lot of game-to-movie 'adaptations' and I've still yet to experience a good one, and I don't think I'm alone on that comment. After reading the comment from Paul WS Anderson ("There is nothing more boring than seeing a movie that is a straight adaptation of a videogame") I had to ask myself, has anyone actually done a movie actually based 90 per cent or more on game? No, at least not that I can recall. So how can he say what he did? In my opinion, he destroyed *Resident Evil*. The movies

Topic: Where next, Nintendo?

Within a year of the Wii's release we've already had the big three franchises from Nintendo (*Mario*, *Zelda*, *Metroid*), and the likes of *Mario Kart*, *Smash Bros* and *Wario Ware* have already had their generational updates. With the exceptions of *Majora's Mask* and *Metroid Prime 2*, Nintendo aren't really known for a quick turnaround within the same generation of their big games, so how do they keep the Wii going?

Keep pleasing the families, and rake it in.

OWEN LISA

In ten years it'll be a bit of trivia that Nintendo used to make games, like it is now with playing cards. They'll be an exercise bike manufacturer.

ROBERT HICK

should have followed the games' story to a T – even with the crap acting I would have loved to have seen that (watching the "What is it?" scene on the big screen would have owned). It's not alone, though. With *Tomb Raider*, I wanted to see Angelina Jolie prance around in a tomb. That's right, I said it. A tomb!

Like a few people I've spoken to, I believe game movies should be as close to the reference source as possible. I was gutted when *Final Fantasy* wasn't set in a mystical world with dragons and the like; instead we get Earth with some crazed spirits. The only movie that's actually any good that is connected to a game in some way shape or form is *FF: Advent Children*, and this is because I can already relate to the character and environment. I think this is what game movies are missing – they're trying to create some new story with characters we don't know or care about and trying to sell it to the mass

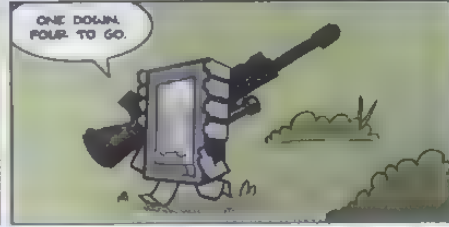
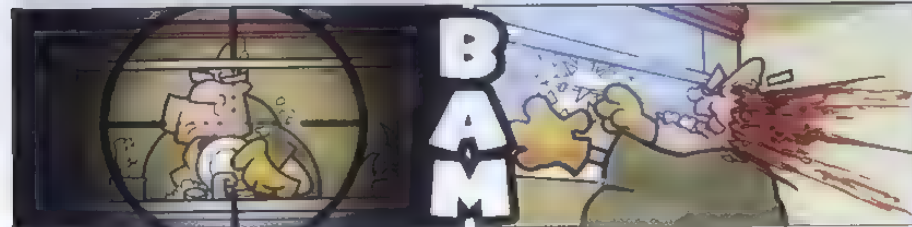
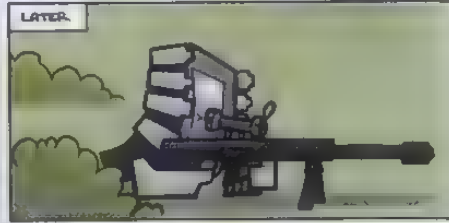
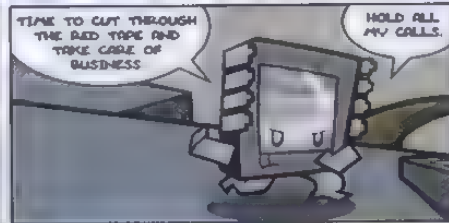
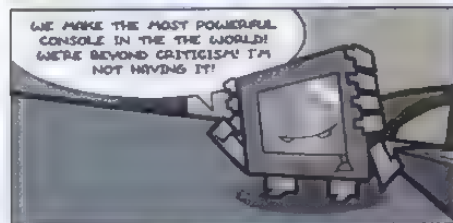
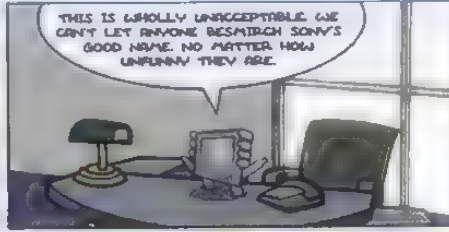
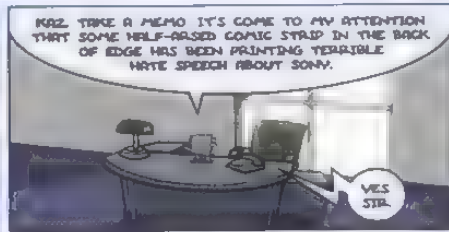
millions. Don't! Give us Lara in a tomb, give us the Spencer Mansion, slap us with characters we care about and love to see instead of ones we don't.

I love hearing people talk about games that usually don't, but giving them movies that have only the name or a few characters that connect the two isn't doing the games any justice.

Nick Robey

Wouldn't watching a 90-per-cent-game-faithful adaptation be a bit too much like watching someone else play through the game itself? We're convinced that a comfortable balance between familiar and new can be found, but we want it sooner rather than later.

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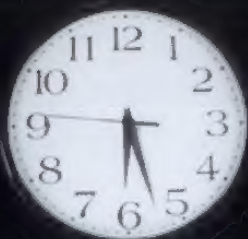
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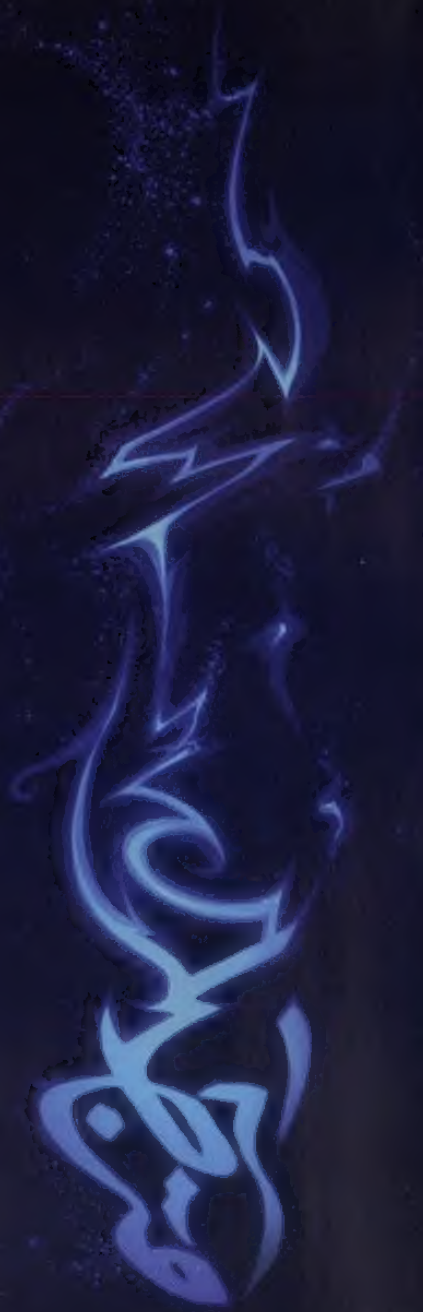
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